



ERE PANI

BANDHERI

G SANIS

USE

YEKHUM

WOKHA

KOTSEN

LAZAM

NAGA

TSEMINYU

TOPHEMA

GARIPHEMA

KIDZEMATUMA

CHECHAMA  
NERHEMA

DTHOMA

CHESWESUMI

KHESOMI

CHOSUMI

& "THE SNAKE-PIT"

IRUNGUZUMI

KULUZU BASAMI

KULUZU BAGWEMA

THEREPESEMI

PHEZACHEDAMA & "PONCE FORT"

# LEGEND

- COLUMN'S ROUTE
- == MOKOKCHUNG TRACK
- █ KOHIMA ROAD

THE DISTANCE  
BETWEEN EACH VILLAGE  
IS AN AVERAGE DAY'S  
MARCH.

RENGMA

ANGAMI NAGA

KOHIMA

INI

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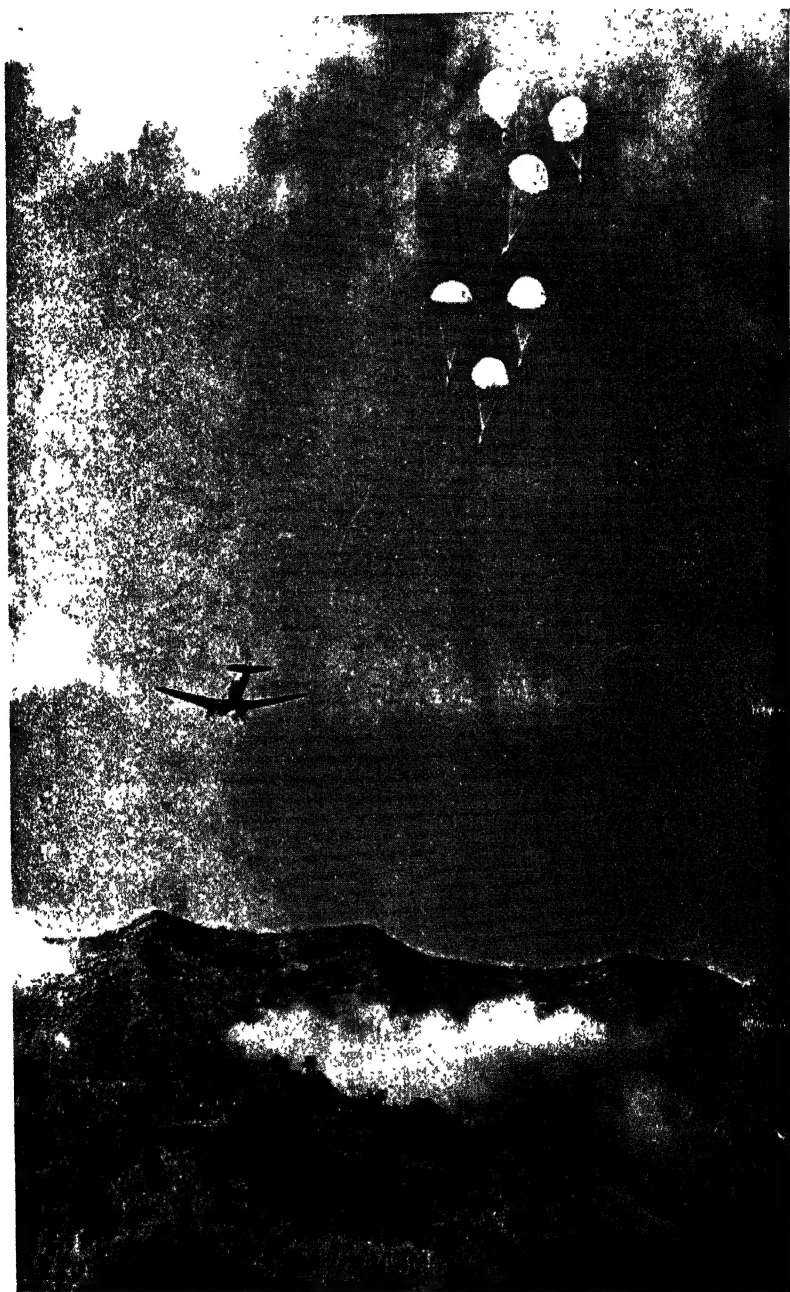
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Dakota flies low to drop food and ammunition.

**W. A. WILCOX**

# **CHINDIT COLUMN 76**

**With nine full-page illustrations  
and two maps**

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The end-paper map and the map on page 103 were drawn by the Author. The design for the dust-jacket was also made by him.

To the officers and men of Column 76, of the 2nd Battalion,  
the Duke of Wellington's Regiment.



## INTRODUCTION

### (1)

March, 1944: A Nippon Army of 3 divisions had crossed the broad Chindwin River and climbed into the Naga Hills, mighty barrier dividing Burma and India.

Manipur State was in immediate danger; the townships of Kohima and Imphal—the latter with its huge aircraft landing strip—were the first main objectives.

Almost to the very gates of these two towns and meeting no opposition, the hopes of the Japanese High Command reached a new level. Kohima and Imphal were merely stepping-stones to far bigger prizes. Manipur, Assam and finally all India would feel the weight of Japanese boots.

Kohima and Imphal prepared for a siege. The situation was serious and the defenders knew it. British and Indian troops were rushed to the front to stem the flood.

So certain of ultimate victory were the Japanese that, as their armies looked down from the hills on the two cities, their radio stations in Burma were already proclaiming to India that Kohima and Imphal had fallen.

In the towns below, however, men of sterling worth, Europeans and Indians, oiled their rifles and sited their big guns, determined at all costs to keep out the invaders.

### (2)

The British Army in India had another card up its sleeve. It had already played such cards in Burma in the capable hands of Maj.-Gen. Charles Orde Wingate, killed that very month in an air-crash.

Chindits, fierce and rough living, had out-fought and out-witted the Japanese in Burma's jungles; were still doing it. These were the men, then, to send into the Naga Hills.

The few roads through the hills were denied to armoured forces by the occupation of the invaders who were bringing convoys of supplies along them, using trucks, mules and elephants. Only mule-tracks, narrow foot-paths and country



untrodden even by the naked feet of the Naga inhabitants would be available to the Chindits—but they *were* Chindits.

The plan of campaign was decided . . . . .

(3)

An obstacle underestimated by the jubilant Japanese was the obstinacy of the Naga Hillmen.

Living peacefully in Government-controlled areas, ruled by such excellent administrators as District Commissioners Adams, Lambert and Paucey, these ex-headhunters had known nothing of the turmoil of modern civilisation. They had kept pigs, tended their paddy-fields, and felt secure in their little bamboo villages high in the hills. True they had a reputation as headhunters, and in uncontrolled areas they still exhibited gruesome trophies of recent skirmishes, but for the most part they lived contentedly under the kindly guidance of Government. Those living in the more remote parts of the Hills seldom saw a white man, other than the District Commissioner making the rounds of his extensive territory. These men the Nagas loved and looked upon as fathers, bringing judgment and justice to the Hills.

Small wonder, then, that the Naga tribes objected to the sudden entry of the Japanese into their Shangri La. The foreigners imposed cruelties upon them, bullied and tortured them, forcing them to yield up their rice and pigs and threatening to burn their villages.

The tribes hated them and passive resistance grew into active participation in the war against Japan. Poorly armed as they were with spears and knives, they were unable to show organised force to the enemy, but woe betide the unfortunate small band of Nippon soldiers who fell into the hands of the Nagas.

Heads began to fall again . . . . . Japanese heads.

This is not a story of the campaign against the Japanese by the British and Indian Armies ; I am no military strategist. It is the story of a small column of Chindits among the Naga tribesmen. It is a story as I saw it in the three months I spent with them ; a story of a primitive people's determination to resist a modern, well-equipped enemy.

## CHAPTER 1

*JAPS IN THE WOODS*

Good Friday, 1944: Reynold Newcombe and I were having tea with the Rev. C— in his bungalow on the outskirts of a small town in Assam.

This was Tea-country—it rolled before us, miles and miles of low green bushes, north to the distant Himalayas and south to the Naga Hills.

Our host was talking “tea”; he had statistics at his finger tips; pounds of tea, acres of tea, inches of rainfall and numbers of coolies employed. He was the chaplain to the planters and knew every square mile of his vast “parish”.

North to the Himalayas and south to the Naga Hills . . . . my mind wandered south.

The Hills—they were really mountains—loomed large and blue in the near-distance, a broken jagged outline against the sky. They held a special interest for me. Newcombe and I were going to climb those peaks. We knew that any time now the command would be given to start the long, back-breaking trek through the hills in an all-out endeavour to wrinkle out the little yellow men who were filtering through from the Chindwin.

Tojo's Boys, we called them then. The Chindit's parody of a popular nursery jingle ran through my mind:

“My mother said  
I never should,  
Play with the Japsies  
In the Wood.”

The Chindits respected the Japanese as being good soldiers, determined and tenacious in action—but they were not afraid of them. The old Superman bogey had long been exorcised by their late Chief, Maj.-Gen. Charles Orde Wingate.

They were a tough bunch, these jungle-weaned Spartans. Hard-hitting and hard-swearing, they had learned to live “rough”. Newcombe and I had trained with them. We were both Air Force Flight-Lieutenants—he a pilot, I a navigator. Reynold's nick-name was Blondie; he was a yellow-haired Canadian, about twenty-four.

We were attached as R.A.F. Liaison Officers to the columns of the 23rd Infantry Brigade. Both of us were with the same battalion of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, though with different columns. This meant that when we went "in" we would see each other only infrequently.

. . . . . My thoughts passed over the events of the last few days. The news from the Hills was liberally laced with wild rumours. The Imphal-Kohima road has been cut! Kohima has fallen! Paratroops landed at Luming! Dimapur threatened! There was no panic among the people; it just sounded good to talk that way. Much of it was true; most of it was not.

The Chindits were quietly getting ready to slip out of town as soon as the word was given. Stores, arms, explosives and ammunition were coming in all the time. Letters were being written to England—they would be the last for many months. In the Gardens, planters still discussed the crop and their women talked about Darjeeling and said: "But my *dear*—how *wonderful*."

We ate biscuits and honey and the chaplain said: "Have some more tea . . . ."

\* \* \* \*

That night in our bamboo basha, Blondie said to me: "Wonder when we'll go."

I said: "Any time now, by the look of things. Perhaps tomorrow."

Blondie looked at the equipment piled beside his camp-bed, the heavy pack with extra pouches sewn on the sides, the thick harness of webbing with its full ammunition-pouches, holster, sten-gun, grenades, blanket, groundsheet. A Chindit's full equipment weighs 65 lb.

He said: "Judas Priest! How'm I going to shag up those mountains with this lot?" He picked up a hand-grenade and held it lovingly. I said: "For Christ's sake, put that thing down. You know I'm nervous with those things around."

(The lever on mine was tied down with string: I was taking no chances.)

He said: "You should be like me. Can I help it if I've got nerves of steel?"

There were other officers in the basha. The C.O., Lt. Col. E. W. Stevens, and Major Firth were among them. Col. Stevens was a seasoned campaigner—we called him “ Boy ” Stevens.

A D.C. 3 roared over and Tony Firth bawled: “ Identify that aircraft.” I promptly replied: “ Mitsubishi 106, nothing to worry about,” and climbed into bed.

Somebody said: “ He couldn’t tell a Mitsubishi from a Lysander,” and Blondie said: “ Neither can I. What is the difference?” I fell asleep . . . . .

We were up early the next morning. We were up early every morning, that’s the way it is with the Army.

We breakfasted off soya sausages and I learned why the men disliked them.

I said to Lt. Britton: “ I can’t finish these links, Don.” He said: “ Give ’em to me, I’ll eat them ;” and he did. He had a wonderful constitution; he ate everything he could lay his hands on almost throughout the campaign—which was more than I did.

I strolled over to see my three Air Force boys. They were Sgts. White, Corkett and Mallinson. There was still some radio equipment we needed and I wanted a final list of everything. We spent the morning checking, rechecking, testing the equipment, running the chore-horse and charging accumulators until we were satisfied.

All day long, messages and situation-reports (Sitreps) were passing to and fro between Brigade H.Q. and the columns. Steve Dunn, the Intelligence Officer, was hopping up and down like a cat on hot bricks. Things were getting warmer.

In the afternoon the C.O. called a meeting. Brigade had decided to send out a couple of platoons to keep an eye on possible Jap movements in the northern parts of the Hills. Hugh Bond and “ Junior ” Harris were chosen to go. Hugh had to make his way to Mokokchung and Junior’s destination was Wokha. These were Naga villages from which reports had been coming in; the villagers were already cooperative.

The platoons were to take radio-sets with them, establish themselves in the villages, send out patrols and pass back information of enemy movements in the Hills. They would take bullion (silver rupees) on their mules and enlist the services of Nagas in every possible way.

The boys were jubilant. They filled their packs with five days' rations, locked up their trunks and kitbags which were to be left behind, and started off that afternoon.

The situation was developing rapidly, and that was the way we liked it.

Harry Cole and I went to the open-air cinema that night. We sat on the ground and watched a man in a tank in the Western Desert. There was a lot of sand and smoke and the man was retreating through it in the face of Rommel's last big putsch. His face was dirty and streaked with sweat; his name was Humphrey Bogart; the film was "Sahara".

Sergeant Bogart had just met some British Tommies who hadn't heard of the German advance, and he was urging them to "get to hell outa here, for Pete's sake," when a north-country accent in the rear of the audience interrupted with: "All officers of Colonel Stevens' battalion report to Battalion Headquarters, please."

We left, and on the way back Harry said: "This is it."

We found the Colonel, Tony Firth and a few others waiting when we arrived. "Boy" said to me: "Well, here's your chance to have a crack at the Japs." I asked when, and he replied: "Tomorrow. What about your equipment? Is it complete?"

"I still need a 12-volt acc."

"Get one from Blondie, they're not going tomorrow."

Blondie was talking to Sam Hoyle, Major Commanding 33 Column, our sister unit. He said: "Sure, I'll give you an accumulator in the morning," and added: "Some people get all the breaks."

The last officer came in and Tony called us to order. Col. Stevens said: "Gentlemen, Brigade have decided that one column from this battalion will proceed into the Hills tomorrow. 76 Column will go. The column will leave camp at 17.00 hours by motor transport which will take us to the road-head near the village of Merepani, where we shall bivouac for the night." (We looked at our maps.) "Five days' K-rations will be issued to each man in the morning. Full water bottles and chaguls\* will be carried. Mules and mule-loads will be loaded on the lorries by 16.30 hours. O.K., Doug?"

Capt. Deyes, Animal Transport Officer, said: "O.K., sir."

\* Canvas water-bags.

The discussion continued ; Intention—Method—Administration—Questions.

The column's intention was to work south through the hills, behind the Japanese main positions, and to attack and destroy such units that we should find. We were to harass and ambush their food-foraging parties and, wherever possible, prevent their occupation of Naga villages. We would be helped in this by dive-bombing Hurricanes of the 3rd Tactical Air Force. Supply-dropping aircraft would provide us with food and light planes of Colonel Philip Cochrane's American Force would evacuate our sick and wounded wherever we could find air-strips on which the aircraft could land. The light planes would also bring us urgently needed supplies at short notice and take back to Brigade captured documents and items of interest to Intelligence, which they would " snatch " from " message pick-ups ", a simple device consisting of two long bamboo poles and a large loop of twine or parachute cord.

District Commissioners Adams and Lambert were already organising bands of Naga levies. These natives, armed with rifles, would act as spies, guides and guards, supplementing in this last capacity our own camp sentries. (We found them especially useful as spies. Hiding their weapons, they would simply walk into Jap-occupied villages and return with information about enemy positions, numbers of troops and types of weapons. They had little idea of numerical estimation, usually exaggerating the number of enemy troops in a village, but we quickly learned the probable equivalent of a Naga assessment.)

76 Column was highly elated about the proposed movement ; 33 was probably a little jealous. Everyone was in good spirits, however, and we went to bed that night in a state of excited fervour, as all good warriors should.

This job, we knew, was a tough one, calculated to put every one of us through a severe test of endurance and demanding every ounce of physical energy. The way we looked at it, however, was that this was the Real Thing, much better than the months of rigorous training to which we had been subjected. This promised action, the only tonic for a soldier bored with route marches and the hum-drum existence which goes along with training, no matter how out-of-the-ordinary the training may be.

I lay in my bed that night for the last time in three months and thought of the morrow. Tomorrow would be Easter Sunday. What was I doing last Easter Sunday? You know how it is when you are on the eve of a new adventure and you suddenly realise that it coincides with another milestone in the year. You think back a bit—about other milestones. I remembered the Easter Day Joan and I sat on the grassy bank at Saltburn and watched the green-grey sea waves curl up and break into creamy froth and slide up the beach. I was on leave and the war seemed a long way off. We ate brazil nuts bought at the little shop on the promenade, and talked of our coming marriage. That was three Easters ago. How different was this one.

I turned over and went to sleep . . . . .

The first rains of the monsoon were starting, and the new day held promise of rain. Grey clouds obscured the sky and curtailed the heat of the sun.

We were busy that day, making up our equipment into mule loads, weighing everything and holding load-tests on the animals' backs. The mules were obstinate. They jibbed at the loads, bucking and kicking, and the men swore long and loud. Many of the heavy cases were sent flying but the equipment was of stout manufacture and could stand much punishment.

The animals were always like this after a rest; they would calm down once they got used to the loads.

We also had a few bullocks as pack-animals. They proved to be lazy beasts and gave us much trouble during the campaign. However, they did provide us with fresh meat once in a while, and when that happened the "bullocketeer" was only too pleased to be rid of his irksome charge. The column also possessed a few ponies. They would be extremely useful for reconnaissance but their main function was to carry sick and wounded and men affected by heat-stroke.

Loading the animals into the trucks was a sight worth seeing, affording no little amusement. The mules were the worst offenders. Loading ramps were placed behind each truck and a muleteer would take the ramp at the double, his charge cantering behind him. The idea was to get the mule up the ramp and into the truck before he was aware of it. In many cases it worked, mostly it didn't.

The mule, seeing the ramp, would suddenly stop and draw back, jerking at the halter. It required the combined strength of half-a-dozen muscular muleteers, some pulling, some pushing, to manhandle the recalcitrant animal into the truck. Sometimes a more docile animal would be led up the ramp at a run as an inducement to others to follow him.

Six mules to a truck was the usual quota, with thick bamboo between each animal to make a stall. To get them into place whilst the bamboo was being lashed down, more manhandling was necessary. In this work, a powerful, thick-set ex-boxer named Mallinson was invaluable. Ignoring the protests of the kicking mule, he placed his broad shoulders against the offender's flank and by sheer brute strength pushed the animal back into the truck, holding it in place whilst the bamboo was put into position. No mule was too big for him.

The males, of course, were castrated. A pack-animal's lot was not a happy one. (As a private soldier put it to an exasperated muleteer whose animal was particularly recalcitrant : "If you was de-sexed and had to shag up those effing hills with two 'undred effing pounds on yer back, and all yer got to eat was a bag of grain an' bamboo shoots, you'd kick over the traces a bit.") The other sarcastically pointed out that he did have to climb the same hills with 65 lb. on his back and what he ate was hardly steak and kidney pie.)

With the animals aboard, the first convoy left camp, and the note of First Whistle summoned the men to the motor transport for embarkation. They were in high spirits, joking and swearing and promising a fearful end to any Jap who came their way. They certainly looked a tough bunch in their slouch-hats and green jungle-suits. No man could say they vied with the Palace Guards in smartness ; indeed, they looked a ragtag-and-bobtail mob, with their dirty boots, lack of insignia and fancy decorations, and their bush hats punched and bullied into a variety of fantastic shapes.

No. They were not smart. They looked just what they were—jungle fighters, tough and well-disciplined. It has been said that a Gentleman is one who never refuses a kiss, a drink or a fight. Let us call them gentlemen. Drinks and kisses would be more scarce than parsons' wives in a Bombay brothel, but these men would be offered the chance to fight and they wouldn't turn it down.



The convoy left the camp and swung south. Men of the other columns watched us go and wished us good luck—it would be their turn soon. The campaign had commenced. One column of the 23rd Infantry Brigade had picked up the glove and was on its way to the Hills. Others would follow and the Japs in the woods would feel the thrust of a Chindit's stab in the back.

We sat back and watched the miles roll past and everyone was occupied with his own thoughts.

It grew dark and our Indian driver switched on his headlights. He was a Naik (Corporal) and a good driver. I tried to engage him in conversation to while away the two-hour journey, but he didn't "malum" English so I gave him a cigarette and relapsed into silence.

Our bivouac that night was by the side of the road where it shed its importance and was content with being an animal track. This was the road-head near Merepani and the Hills loomed above us and seemed to approve of our silence.

The men spoke quietly as they moved about the camp—we had been trained to speak in whispers. Since the bivouac was screened by thick jungle and there were no enemy troops in the vicinity we were allowed to have fires for the purpose of making tea. The men called this "mashing down" or "brewing up", and a steaming mug of hot "char" was to prove the finest tonic a man could take when his spirits were low.

We ate our supper from a K-ration packet and felt that our packs would be lighter by one meal.

Sentries were posted, the fires extinguished and we lay fully clothed on our ground sheets, covered by the one blanket we each possessed. We were all dog-tired that night and the restless swaying of the mules and weird jungle noises failed to keep us awake—our training had accustomed us to it.

So passed Easter Sunday, 1944 . . . . .

We were up before dawn, every man at Stand To with his weapon. Stand To is the Army custom of standing at the alert with fire-arms cocked, at sun-down and sun-up, based on the theory that an enemy will usually attack a bivouac at those times. Ten weeks after that first night our camp was attacked during the dawn stand-to and the Japanese were unable to effect surprise.

The sun rose and for the first time we were able to take stock of our surroundings. Massed vegetation sprawled everywhere and creepers clung to every tree. The ground we had slept on was a thick carpet of dead leaves and bits of rotten wood. A foetid odour hung over the place ; someone said it smelled like the south side of Jermyn Street.

There were the usual armies of ants and beetles scurrying about, and a burly soldier yelled : " For Christ's sake. Look at this." A leech clung to his leg, its body swollen with blood. So we were in leech country.

There is only one satisfactory way of removing these loathsome pests from the skin—burn them with a cigarette. To pull them off courts disaster as the head may be left in the flesh, causing the wound to fester. Boots and puttees are no protection against leeches. They can crawl through the eyelet of a boot and make their way through clothing with amazing rapidity. During the campaign, more than one man found a leech in intimate places.

After a K-ration breakfast, the muleteers led the animals to water at a nearby stream and we took advantage of a lower reach to bathe and shave. Some columns never shaved during the campaign and came out with luxuriant beards of which they were extremely proud ; but we shaved as long as we had razors and water to spare. Maj.-Gen. Wingate once remarked that to a Chindit a shave after two or three days' abstinence from the razor was as good as a night's sleep. Removing the stubble was very refreshing, but after razors had been lost (they could be replaced by supplies flown in) and when water was obtainable in such quantities as to warrant drinking only, we found ourselves with considerably more than mere " five o'clock shadow ".

Since we were not moving off until one p.m., the journey to our next bivouac on the footslopes being only five miles, we were able to have lunch first. This of course consisted of K-ration, but I found a banana-plantain with its huge purple-red " bud ". It is possible to eat this bud when boiled although I had never done so until now, so, shorn of its purple coat, into the billy-can it went. It tasted terrible.

At one o'clock we shouldered our packs, loaded up the mules, and started on the first march of the campaign. The column walked in single file. We seldom talked and when we

did it was in whispers through force of habit. There was no rain, the heat was stifling and our shirts under the heavy packs clung to our bodies as we perspired.

We intended to make our way to Wokha, capital village of the Lotah Naga country. A glance at our maps told us that Wokha was forty-five miles distant in the midst of a topographical riot. There was only one road, a tortuous narrow animal-track, and we were now on it. In fact, it was the only road through the hills as far south as Kohima, where the Nips were raising merry hell.

We knew the enemy were already using the road south of Wokha and were even in the vicinity of the village. Our immediate plan was to take Wokha and stop any small bodies of troops coming north; we were too few to deal with a really large contingent and, in fact, we didn't expect a large force.

Meanwhile, ahead of us, Junior had been stopped on his way to Wokha and ordered to join Hugh Bond at Mokokchung, where it was considered more likely he would be needed.

At the end of an hour's steady marching the column came to a halt for a short rest. The usual course was to march for an hour, rest for a quarter-hour, and so, seemingly, *ad infinitum*. This worked very well at first, but when later we struck really difficult country the marching time was cut down to suit the nature of the terrain, and the rest period was accordingly lengthened.

The animals were always unloaded during a halt and then we would sink down with our heads on our packs and wipe the sweat from our bodies. No one was allowed to drink from his water bottle or chagul without permission from the C.O. This was only given when we were near a stream and had time to refill our bottles, or at the request of the Medical Officer, Donald Gunn, in the case of men suffering from heat-stroke or heavy fatigue.

Donald was one of the nicest fellows I ever met and, although very ill himself later, spared no effort to tend the sick and wounded. Our other non-combatant was the Padre, the Rev. Lawrence Woods, who limped through the hills on a game leg when his ankle had given up and he had to be evacuated after three months. A doctor and a padre, they looked like educated Johnny-Come-Lately's in their slouch hats and rough green shirts.

But then we all looked like tramps.

First Whistle, get "dressed", load mules; Second Whistle, the march was resumed . . . . . So it went on.

Progress was rather slow; we were still in the plains but the pack-animals, especially the bullocks, were our brakes. The latter had an exasperating habit of lying down in the middle of a march and almost nothing short of lighting a fire under them would get them to their feet again.

The sun beat down and I wished it would rain. It would have been cooling and I did have a spare shirt in my pack.

When we finally reached our bivouac for the night we found it was a tangled web of thick vegetation and bamboo clumps. There was nothing to do but carve a path through it, which those in the front of the column did, whilst we luckier members of Rear Column H.Q. sat on our rumps and smoked American cigarettes from our ration-packets.

Those in front had found an old foot-path through the growth, but it was so overgrown with creepers and thorn-bushes that it required forty minutes of hard slashing with dahs and machetes before the column with its loaded mules could pass along. In the jungle we found ourselves in a series of lanes trampled flat by huge feet. Tony Firth pointed to some large turds and said: "Elephants."

The usual odour of rotting vegetation hung over the place and the ground was damp and covered in leaves. It wasn't Home but we were glad to take our packs from our aching shoulders and "book rooms" by spreading our ground-sheets on the piece of earth we fancied most.

There was barely time to boil tea before dusk fell and the fires had to be put out. I decided to have a wash since there was a stream about two hundred yards away down the elephant tracks.

The water was cool and refreshing and I bathed quickly as the dusk deepened. I poured water over my head, splashed my face and lay on my back in the stream, revelling in the swiftly-flowing current. This was good, it took the tired feeling from my limbs.

The sky was now dark and I was alone.

A loud barking cough shattered the stillness of the opposite bank of the narrow stream . . . . . a panther.

I looked at my gun on the bank, a '38 revolver, and decided to get dressed. The '38 is a poor weapon except at really close range, and I didn't want to be that close to a panther. I dressed hurriedly, strapped the pistol to my side, and set off back to the bivouac.

The maze of tracks were very much alike and I soon realised I had taken a wrong turning somewhere. I stood still in the dark forest and tried to orientate myself. I heard something move in the undergrowth. There was little moon, just enough to accentuate the shape of the trees, and cause them to throw shadows.

I knew I was close to the camp, yet I could hear no sound. The rigorous Chindit training demands that a bivouac keep silent, betraying no sign of its presence to an enemy. It is amazing how close you can be to a Chindit camp in the jungle without knowing.

I decided to return to the stream and start again. Thick tree roots stuck up from the ground and I stumbled over one of these and fell, bruising my shin. I cursed the trees, the jungle noises, the darkness and, above all, I cursed myself for getting lost.

Reaching the stream, I tried another track, and after a few minutes stumbled again. The offending obstacle this time was considerably larger than a tree-root. I looked at it and could hardly believe my eyes . . . . a mule. I could have kissed it.

A shadow detached itself from the bushes and stuck a gun in my ribs.

"Who goes there?"

"Friend."

"Give the password."

"Mandalay."

"Peking—pass friend."

I was back in camp.

That night, at orders, Tony Firth said: "Warn the men not to go beyond the camp perimeter. It's too easy to get lost in this stuff."

I gave what I hoped was a mirthless chuckle. Addressing the platoon-commanders, Tony continued:

"Also warn the men that this is elephant country. We don't want any thundering Jumbos blundering in on us during the night."

He was probably romancing—the turds were old—but it was a good thing to expect trouble. The unexpected always seems to happen in the jungle. The only thing that did happen, however, was rain—and the C.O. got a leech on his foot.

The rain lashed down during the night. We had one groundsheet apiece ; it either went under us or over us. When it rained, as it usually did during the monsoon season, we simply turned over, pulled the groundsheet from under us and covered our bodies with it. Our blankets were thus entrusted to the mercy of the wet ground and any ants, lice and leeches that cared to come in out of the rain.

## CHAPTER 2

### LOTAH NAGAS

The narrow road through the hills was steep. Cut out of the mountain, which overlooked it on one side and fell away, a precipitous *khud*, on the other, it wound and twisted like a tortured snake.

We eased the weight on our aching shoulders, cursed the glaring sun and mopped the sweat from our grimy faces with equally grimy handkerchiefs.

Our immediate destination was Bandheri, a small Naga village perched high in the Hills. All Naga villages were sited on high peaks, a reminder of the not-so-distant headhunting days when every village was a castle and height its best friend. The natives of Bandheri belonged to the Lotah tribe and spoke a language entirely different from other Naga tribes, regarding them as foreigners.

We had left the plains in the early morning and hoped to reach the village by noon. Up and up we toiled, thankful for every brief rest when, after unloading the mules, we could stretch out in the shade of the overhanging rock and smoke the cigarette for which we had been longing.

We looked back. In the distance, beyond the ragged peaks and jungle-clad nullahs, lay the plains from whence we came. Marching had seemed a laborious business then ; it was much more so now, and was destined, we knew, to become even

more back-breaking. Our lips were dry, throats parched ; the painful uphill progress and the hot sun made us thirsty. Don Britton fell into step beside me and we passed the time torturing each other with memories of cool drinks in the Harbour Bar of the Taj, Bombay. Don's favourite vision was of iced lager. I preferred Pym's No. 1 or a John Collins.

I said: "How about a nice, tall, sparkling lager with pieces of ice chinking in the frosted glass?"

His look was almost lethal.

In front of me, bothered by flies, moved a mule. Or, rather, a mule's behind, for that was all I could see.

A mule's behind is surely the most ludicrous sight on this earth. I think so. I walked many, many miles behind one. It always struck me as being just half an animal ; the rumps were there, the tail and the legs ; but above the tail there was nothing. Nothing, that is, but the metal contraption on which the panniers were hooked. Certainly nothing animal. I could never see the front nor the sides of the mule ; they were hidden behind the panniers. To me, the thing in front was just a walking backside upon two stiff-jointed legs that jerked, air-cooled by the never-ending *swish, swish* of the fly-chasing tail. Here moved a Centaur that had forgotten its human upper half. You get to think like that when you've followed a mule for many, many miles.

So the time passed in silent reflection and occasional whispered wisecracks, and then we would heave at our packs, pulling on the harness to ease the weight.

On and on, the road was hot and dusty ; the *khud* tumbled away to our left, covered in trees and tall bamboo. Behind me came the Air Force men with the mules carrying our equipment. My boys were bearing up splendidly—they had never carried a pack in their lives before yesterday, nor had they marched. I was luckier, since I had trained with the column before going "in", but their misfortune lay in the fact that they were replacements rushed up at the last moment. Their boots, too, were brand new, had not been "broken in" and were unstudded ; an unhappy situation on such a march.

"Boots, boots, marching up and down again. Boots, boots— —."

The last strenuous half-mile and we found ourselves at Bandheri, arriving shortly after two o'clock.

The inhabitants came out to greet us and we got our first real glimpse of village life in the Hills. They were an incredibly happy people, simple and unaffected, basking in the seclusion of their hill-top home. Short, muscular and of sturdy build, they wore the merest scrap of loin-clout, their hind-quarters being uncovered. They wore necklaces and bracelets of coloured beads and animals' teeth, and their heads were shaven below the scalp, leaving a bush of hair on top.

There was an Inspection Bungalow at Bandheri, the home of the District Commissioner on his tour of the territory and the haven of rest for an occasional missionary. We decided to use it for our headquarters. It proved to be sparsely furnished but contained a table, some chairs and a bed for the C.O. There was also a bound volume of *Punch*, dated 1927. The guardian of the bungalow turned out to be a grizzled old native attired in a scarlet blanket. The blanket was a present from Government and was his badge of office proving him to be a Gaumbara (headman). Curiously enough, he preferred to be known by the less noble title of Chaukidhar, a watchman. He obviously considered his job as caretaker far more important than being a headman, though it seemed strange to us that a loud cry of "Chaukidhar" would bring the local king at the double.

We were fortunate in having a Tabashi (interpreter) with us. He was a high-class kind of Naga, educated at Government expense in Kohima. His name was Tommy and to prove he was Anglicised he sported a bright green shirt, khaki shorts and a Boy Scouts' necktie of vivid yellow. He chewed betelnut—a rare sight in the Hills—and spoke English fluidly.

We informed the Gaumbara, through Tommy Tabashi, that we needed water—lots of it. The result was a continuous chain of children toiled up the hill all that afternoon, bringing water in hollow bamboo, only too happy to serve the white men who had such wonderful gadgets as the big white eye (my Aldis signalling lamp) and magic boxes that talked and made weird squealing noises (radio sets).

We gave them chewing-gum and cigarettes from our rations and made friends for life.

Water is something of a problem in the villages. It is usually found on the hillside or in some nullah below the village, and every pint must be carried up. "Drinking Purposes



Only " is an unwritten rule among the natives and a wise-acre among us placed it on record that the age of a Naga can be determined by the layers of dirt on his skin. (Later in the campaign, when water was more strictly rationed, it was said that the age of a Chindit might be assessed by the same method.)

The Naga village lay just below the bungalow, and I was eager to see it; so whilst the animals were being watered I strolled through the thick clumps of bamboo and entered the compound. Not a soul could be seen; the only signs of life were the innumerable small black hairy pigs and the busily scratching hens.

Slowly, I walked the length of the compound, examining the structure of the huts. I had a feeling that eyes were glued to cracks in every wall.

Each tiny hut was constructed of bamboo and mud and stood upon piles about three feet from the ground. The roofs were extremely well thatched, able to withstand the heavy downpour of the monsoon. In shape, the huts were uniform, looking like upturned barges with huge wooden keels. This type of hut was standard in all Lotah villages but other tribes had their own style of architecture.

No one had appeared in the compound, so, feeling something of an intruder, I turned back towards the entrance, a rickety bamboo gate.

I heard a baby crying and the whispered admonitions of its mother. I decided I wasn't welcome—a white "bogey-man".

Somebody called to me and I turned. It was the red-blanketed Gaumbara. Behind him stood three men, looking very fierce in their brief loin-clouts and animal-teeth decorations. I saw that each one had a *lapok*—a kind of short, sharp butcher's cleaver, primarily used for felling bamboo—in the wooden sheath on his buttocks.

This, I told myself, is a ticking-off for invading the village precincts—and so it was.

They jabbered excitedly in their local tongue, gesticulating wildly, pointing at the village and the bungalow, and the only words I could understand were "Deecce" and "bung'low". I took it that the D.C., Mr. Adams, had promised that the village would be a *sanctum sanctorum* as far as the infrequent visitors to the bungalow were concerned. It is difficult to apologise to people who speak another tongue, so I gave them

all a cigarette, patted the Gaumbara on the back and made a bee-line for the gate.

The troops were resting and teasing the Lotah children when I returned. I sought out Sgt. Corkett, and said :

"We'll be taking a supply-drop the day after tomorrow. Get your set up ; there'll be a signal to pass."

He said: "O.K., sir," and went off to find his two colleagues. I entered the Inspection Bungalow and said to the Colonel :

"I'm having the set put up, sir. Any idea where we'll be taking the drop?"

He looked up from his map: "I think so. I was just checking up on the map. I think we'll take it at Sanis on the 14th. That'll give us two days to get there. Donald's making up a list now."

I looked at the map. It wouldn't be easy to site a dropping-zone anywhere ; the hills constituted a potential danger to low-flying aircraft. I gave a low whistle.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just thinking, sir, I wouldn't fly low in these hills, in this weather, for a pension."

"Bad, is it?"

"It isn't good."

In the monsoon low cloud often obscured the peaks, visibility coming down to nil.

I saluted and went outside ; lit a cigarette. The radio was up and the chore-horse busy charging accumulators, ticking over like a two-stroke to the admiration of a small knot of Naga children. Sgt. Mallinson was trying to erect the aerial.

Don Britton came over with a list in his hand :

"Do your boys need anything on this drop?"

"We need a new valve—a T.R. 18. Corkett will give you the details."

"Anything else?"

"I want some binoculars, Don. Haven't got any."

He made a note, and I called Sgt. Corkett over. We went into a huddle about valves.

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The evening was cool and the officers were sitting on the verandah, joking and talking pleasantly of this and that.

I was watching the fireflies, a million tiny flash-lights winking in the darkness. The huge flying-beetles in the trees kept up their steady loud drone, the sound of a circular saw in motion.

"Pardon, sir—a gentleman to see you."

The voice of a sentry addressed the C.O. We might have been in a comfortable Mess in New Delhi for all the concern the sentry showed. The Colonel said: "A gentleman to see me?"

A strange figure emerged from the gloom and entered the tiny circle of light from the shielded hurricane-lamp. Our visitor looked strangely out of place in this village of naked Nagas. He was an Indian, dressed in an immaculate white duck-suit, and bore in his arms two bottles containing a creamy-white liquid. He spoke in perfect English:

"Good-evening, gentlemen. Allow me to introduce myself—I am the doctor in these parts."

We rose and greeted him, bidding him be seated. He placed the bottles on the table.

"The natives told me you were here. I'm very glad to see you—so seldom do we have visitors in this part of the world."

"You live here?"

"In the hospital. I have a hospital three miles down the track—not a very prepossessing place—just a shack—but nevertheless a hospital."

He indicated the bottles.

"I brought you some *dzu*—Naga rice-beer. I thought you would like it."

The Colonel said: "This is very kind of you."

"Not at all."

We unearthed mugs from our packs. The liquid was delightful, tasting not unlike cider, and having a pungent aroma very pleasing to the nostrils.

Don said: "This for me—you can keep your iced lager."

"I will. It won't all be rice-beer and skittles."

The doctor was a pleasant conversationalist. He knew the Hills and the people and from him we gleaned much information about both. We asked questions: What did the Nagas think of the Nippon invaders? How did we rate in their estimation? Could we expect much help as we had been led to believe?

The Japanese, he said, were hated in the Hills. Stories of atrocities and plunder were circulating among the people of the Hills. Foraging-parties were touring the Districts, forcing the villages to give rice and pigs under the threat of burning and pillage. The people knew that Government would send British soldiers to rout out the invader. Nagas were flocking to join the band of Scouts being formed at Mokokchung with the help of the District Commissioners. The people of the Naga Hills were prepared to help us in every way.

Were they still headhunters? Only in the unadministered areas. We had been told that one village got a "bag" of two hundred heads only last Christmas—was it true? He replied that he had heard so himself but couldn't be certain, though such a thing was far from improbable. The people in the Administered areas, we said, seemed peaceful enough. He said they were, that there was very little crime in the Hills. Most of the villages along the Wokha-Kohima track, he added, could boast a small Christian element,—the results of hard-working missionaries who, years before, had gone among the headhunting Nagas armed only with a Bible.

Though we little suspected, it at the time, however, heads were soon to fall again! Tired of the Japanese slogan, "Co-prosperity", which manifested itself only in slaughter, rape and pillage, the old fighting-blood of the Nagas coursed once more through the veins of the Hill-men. Ex-headhunters became headhunters and even the most Christian-like Naga reached for his *lapok* at the approach of a Jap. Their spears and knives were no match, of course, for the rifles and grenades of the well-trained Nippon soldiers, but their inborn cunning helped to make up for their primitive weapons. Heaven help the lone Jap or small isolated band who foolishly entered a Naga village! Even the Emperor Tenno couldn't save them.

. . . . . Eventually our guest rose and excused himself. We wished him goodnight and thanked him again for the *dzu*. The darkness swallowed him.

I went to the radio-set, where Corkett was still trying to get through to Air Base. We wanted to send a request for a supply-drop; the demand form in code lay at the operator's elbow. Unable to contact the Base all evening, Sgt. Corkett suggested that the fault may be attributed to bad siting, and I agreed that the high range of hills which lay between us and

far-off Air Base was a barrier in the path of our sound-waves. I decided that morning would be a better time to try ; the air might contain less moisture then. The column was scheduled to move out at 07.30 hours, however, so I went to the Colonel and suggested that the set, operators and myself stayed behind after the column had departed in an endeavour to send off the all-important message.

The C.O. said : " Very well—but you must catch up with the column as soon as you can. I'll leave you a section as bodyguard." He opened a map, and indicated a place near a stream. " We'll stop here for the breakfast halt. We'll be there an hour ; try and make it if you can."

I said : " Right, sir. We'll have breakfast whilst Corkett is trying to get through."

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The column left Bandheri dead on time the next morning. A gathering of Nagas watched them go and when the last man had disappeared round the bend in the road, the audience came over to the set. White, Mallinson and my batman were boiling tea over a wood fire ; I sat with Sgt. Corkett at the set. We were still having trouble ; the air was not yet cleared and Corkett was swearing.

A section of eight men had been left behind as promised and the sergeant-in-charge came over to me.

" Will you post the section, sir." I rose and climbed the mound on which the bungalow stood, overlooking the road.

I said : " We'll have the Bren here, sergeant. It commands a good view of the road."

He signalled to the Bren-gunner who came up and sighted his gun on the bend below.

" Put a man each side of the road at the bend, hidden in the bamboo, and one at the rear of the bungalow. The others can mash down and then relieve the sentries for breakfast."

He said : " O.K., sir," and went off to give the men their orders.

I returned to the set where White and Mallinson were having breakfast. My batman handed me a mug of hot tea and I opened a ration packet. I said :

" Relieve Corkett when you've finished your *khana*, White."

"How's it going?"—this to Corkett. The answer is unprintable.

It was almost an hour later when, having taken over again from White, Corkett gave a shout:

"I've got it; I'm through!"

I said: "Good—get it off as quick as you can."

The men had breakfasted and were scattering the fires, covering the ashes with earth, burying the debris. Chindits leave no trace of their camp that might betray their presence. I told the muleteers to saddle up and bring their animals to the set.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir."

"Be ready to move in twenty minutes. Have the men get their water-bottles and chaguls filled."

"Very good, sir." He turned to give orders. Corkett was tapping out the long message at high speed. Naga children scuttled down the hill-side with our empty chaguls. The Gaumbara took mine. It was leaking but your Naga is a resourceful fellow. He went to a nearby tree and, taking his *lapok* from the wooden sheath, cut a V-shaped nick in the trunk. A milky resin seeped out and trickled down the bark. This the Gaumbara rubbed on the crack in the chagul. He took a glowing piece of wood from a dying fire and, holding it near the sealed crack, blew on it until the gum hardened. He grinned with pride as I filled the chagul from my water-bottle; the chagul was water-tight.

The signal passed, Corkett was beaming. We loaded the set on the mules, formed up in file and said goodbye to the natives of Bandheri. I gave the Gaumbara two new silver rupees, a gesture which pleased him immensely.

The road ran downhill from the village, and, being a small band, we were able to march at a good pace. I liked to be away from the column like this; the long line with its many beasts of burden moved too slowly for my satisfaction. For an hour we marched and then I called a halt for a rest. We unloaded the mules and allowed them to graze on the sparse grass by the track. I had posted a sentry at a bend a little further down the road and presently he called to me. I rose and walked to the bend. The sentry pointed down the track. A small band of brightly attired men, women and children

were coming towards us. They carried heavy loads in their arms, battered suitcases and rolls of bedding. These weren't Hill-folk, not Nagas; their dress and features proved that. I decided they were Manipuri. They came up, and I stopped them and addressed them in my bastard version of *jungli-bat*, a mixture of Urdu and English. They were refugees, they said, from Kohima, and were making their way through the hills into India.

"*Japani wallah tum dekho hai?*" I asked in atrocious Urdu.

"*Han.*"

"Judas! Where? *Kiddhar hai?*"

They said near Wokha; I breathed a sigh of relief.

"*Angresi wallahs?*"

Yes, there were English soldiers near the stream two miles away. I walked back to the men and said: "Get dressed." They loaded the mules and put on their own packs.

We came upon the column having breakfast. The Colonel said: "Did you get the message off?"

"Yes, sir. It's in the bag—10.30 tomorrow at Sanis."

"Good. We're pushing off soon. First whistle in twenty minutes."

I went back to Rear Column Headquarters where I had left my heavy equipment. The Padre was there, lying on his back with his boots off. He said:

"Hello, how's tricks?"

"Not so bad, Bish, thanks. Better put your boots on, First Whistle's in fifteen minutes." (We always called him "Bish"—he liked it; said it was less formal than "Padre".) I took a lemonade powder from my ration and mixed myself a drink.

The Bish said: "Where's our next bivouac?"

I pointed it out on my map; five miles away near a stream.

The whistle blew. I dug a hole in the ground with my heel, put my cigarette in and buried it. The Bish did the same. We could have camped on the lawn at Buckingham Palace and still be on the right side of the Anti-Litter Society.

The stream had to be crossed by a bridge. The column took a long time to cross, since only half-a-dozen men and mules could use the bridge at a time. It wasn't strong enough to allow more, and, besides, six men are less conspicuous to a prying enemy patrol than a whole column. It was quite on

the cards that a Japanese patrol might be in the vicinity. Overhanging rock and a thick belt of trees screened us whilst the others crossed. With everyone across, the march was resumed. The road now climbed steeply and we cursed every foot of it. Marching up a mountain with a heavy pack on your back is like beating yourself on the head with a hammer—it's so pleasant when you stop. That is how we felt when we finally reached the bivouac-area. We threw off our packs and sank to the ground, exhausted but grateful.

Colonel Stevens called a meeting of officers. "Allow fifty per cent of your men to go to the stream for a wash," he said, "and you, Baron,"—to six-foot, bushy-moustached Lieutenant Emmett; he looked like a Baron—"you detail a guard for the stream."

Donald Britton appeared through the trees, coloured flags in his hand. He said: "I'm just going down to mark off the stream," and disappeared. Streams were partitioned off in this manner; upstream was the men's drinking water, below that the animals' drinking water and lower still lay the men's bathing water. Tony Firth also disappeared into the undergrowth. He carried a kukri and was looking for somewhere private. The kukri is a curved Gurkha knife and its sharp blade is extremely useful in many categories; an instrument for beheading Japanese, an axe to cut through bush or fell the stoutest bamboo, or a spade to dig a one-man latrine. Major Firth had the look of a man who was going to dig a latrine.

I ran a hand over my three-day stubble and decided to shave. I returned to the radio and told the boys to go down to the stream when they were ready. Big Bill Mallinson asked: "Are we staying here the night, sir?"

I said: "Yes." /

Grey clouds were gathering above and it looked like rain. I picked up my towel and razor and made for the stream. The water was shallow, clear and cool. Several of the men were splashing about, water glistening on their nude, sun-bronzed bodies. Others were shaving on the bank. I stripped off my clothes and waded into the stream. It felt good. I sat down and splashed water over my head, lay on my back and wallowed in it; it was the panacea for all aching limbs. As I dressed a man came out of the trees and said: "C.O. wants you, sir."



I tucked in my shirt, picked up my towel and razor, and followed the messenger through the undergrowth. A spot of rain fell on my nose ; the sky looked threatening.

Captain Fazackerley was with the C.O.

The Colonel said : " Have you had food ? "

" Not yet, sir. "

" Better get it now. You and Bill's platoon are going on to Sanis. The column may be late arriving tomorrow, so it might be better if you have a look at the place and pick out a dropping-zone. "

" Good idea. " I turned to Bill Fazackerley. " What time are you shoving off ? "

" One-thirty—can you be ready ? " I looked at my watch ; it was one o'clock. " Right—I'll be on the track at one-thirty. "

I said to the Colonel : " What about my set, sir ? . Shall I take it along ? "

" No, your blokes can rest, they're pretty tired. It can come with us in the morning. "

The rain started as I walked back to my set. It came down heavily. My batman peered at me from beneath his ground-sheet when I arrived. He said : " Can't get a fire going for tea, sir. Wood's wet. "

I ate a cold meal of cheese and biscuits washed down with still lemonade. Since I was already wet to the skin I scorned the protection of a groundsheet. The rain came down in torrents, streamed off my face.

At one-thirty I met Fazackerley on the track with his men.

He said : " The Padre wants to come. Hang on a bit. "

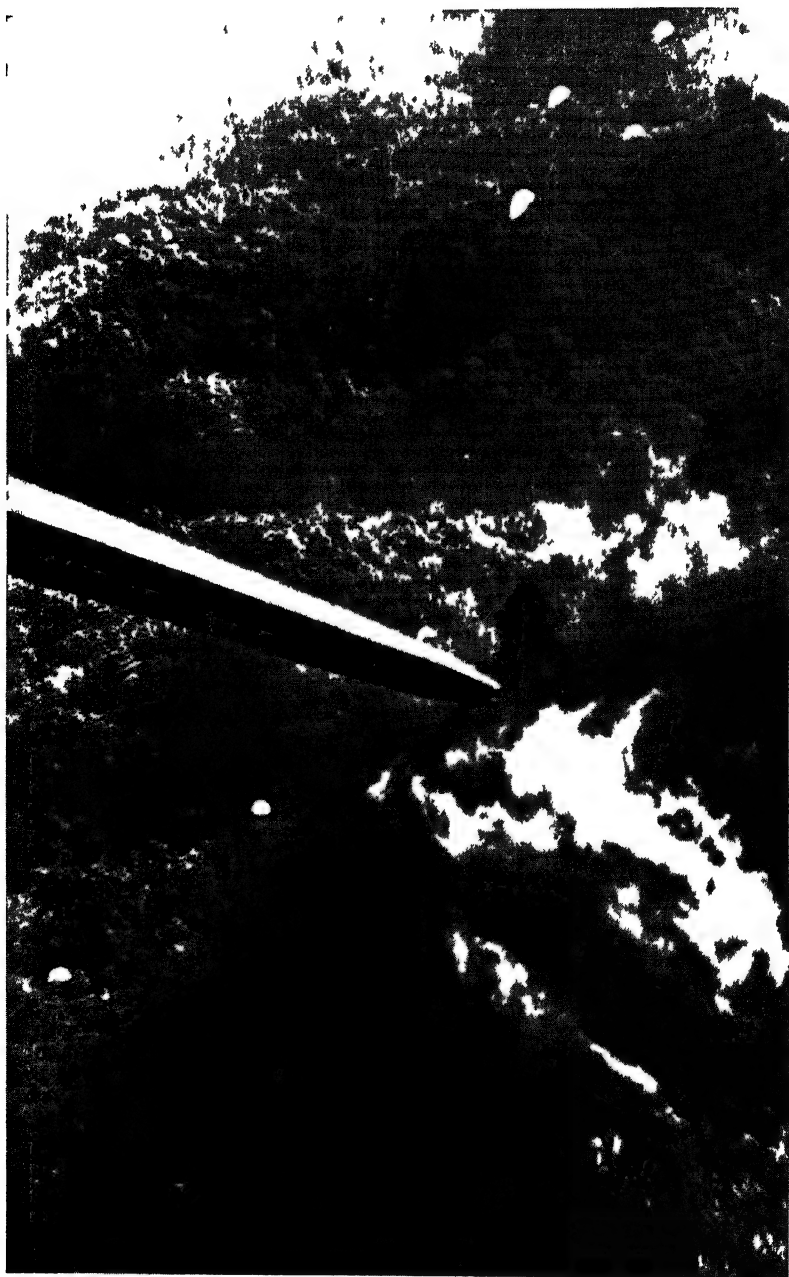
The Bish came out of the forest pulling on his equipment. He said : " I'm going to help you choose your flare-path. "

It was still raining heavily as we turned a bend and left the camp behind. Bill's men were known as " The Commandos ". They could build air-strips where I lucky enough to find suitable ground in the Hills, and were demolition-experts, skilled in the use of explosives and master-demons in the art of laying booby-traps. Their present task was to lay a flare-path of bonfires on a site I would choose at Sanis. The L-shaped flare-path would be a guide to the Dakotas as they flew in to drop their load of supplies.

As we walked Bill said : " They tell me you've got your grenades tied up with string. "



The Column moves into the jungle.



In the depths of the Naga jungle country Chindits are waiting to retrieve supplies.

I said: "That's right, I have. I don't trust those things any more than I would trust a Jap with a Tommy-gun."

"What if you get into a tough spot and have to use 'em?"

"I admit that would be a trifle awkward."

The Bish said: "That, my friend, is a masterpiece of understatement."

"He means it would be *bloody* awkward," explained the lanky Commando.

We halted at a spring and drank our water, refilling the bottles from the cold, swift outflow. The Bish, sitting on his pack, said: "Don't you think this type of jungle is rather Hollywoodesque?"

I said: "Sort of 'Road to Mandalay'." Bill cut in with "Road to Wokha and no Dorothy Lamour."

We camped that night in the jungle, a mile from Sanis and below the village. I had left my batman behind, and Bill's batman, Morgan, a tubby, sharp-eyed, quick-eared Welshman, helped me build a fire and cook my supper ration. Bill came up to me as I ate my food. He had eaten his whilst mine was still cooking. He said: "I think I'll go up and have a look at the village."

I said: "It's getting dark."

"I won't be long. It's only a mile up the hill."

He was away two hours. He came back and said:

"That's the darn'dest mile I ever walked."

"Pretty steep, is it?"

"Steep! You've never climbed anything like it yet. I had to stop for a rest every hundred yards, and I didn't even have a pack to carry! God knows how the column will get up it!"

"What's the village like?"

"Much bigger than Bandheri. There's a platoon of Indians up at the I.B. Poor devils got cut up a bit at Kohima and they're making their way back to India. Jemadar in charge of them—surprised to see me—didn't know there were any troops this side of Kohima."

"Are they still armed?"

"Yes, they've got rifles and they're lugging mortars about with 'em—got no mules."

"How are they off for food?"

"Haven't got any. They're scrounging rice off the Nagas."

I picked an insect off my face and lay down. Bill said : " We'll go up at First Light. The Indians are pulling out early in the morning. We should pass 'em."

I called through the darkness : " Hear that, Bish? First Light !" A snore was the only reply. Bill chuckled. He said :

" I think the Padre should be de-snored."

" Did you notice his limp as we came up?"

" Yes, it's his old complaint. Something wrong with his ankle. I've seen it before."

" He shouldn't have come."

" I know. He doesn't say much about it though—just plods along like the rest of us."

I took off my puttees and unlaced my boots. A mosquito whined past my ear and I made a swipe at it. Bill said goodnight. I answered goodnight, and rolled fully-clothed into my blanket.

A sentry moved in the undergrowth. I could hear the " circular-saw " droning in the trees. The Bish snored . . . . .

### CHAPTER 3

## SANIS

Bill was right about the climb ; it was the steepest ascent we had yet been called upon to make. We puffed and struggled, halting every few dozen yards to regain our wind. The equipment we carried had never seemed heavier and we wondered how the column would manage, encumbered as it was with the long string of pack-animals. The bullocks, I thought, would just give up and sink to the ground. All the King's horses would never get them to move.

The Indians came down in single file. They were a small band of sepoy led by a jemadar. Unshaven and unwashed, some of them wounded, they looked a sorry sight in their dishevelled uniforms, but they gave us a cheery greeting as we passed, to which we readily responded with : " Hello, Johnny ! *Tikh hai?*" They said : " *Bahut tikh,*" and the jemadar asked if we could spare any cigarettes. The Commandos needed no asking—every manjack stopped and handed over half his small supply, for which the sepoy were truly grateful. We

were unable to supply them with food as we only had one day's rations in our packs and were even now on half-rations in case of a hitch in the supply-drop plans. Shouldering their heavy mortar-cases they said goodbye and set off again down the road that led towards the plains of India. We continued the climb. Two Hurricanes flew overhead, heading for Kohima. We were already five thousand feet above mean sea level and I nodded to the speeding fighters and said :

" I know a quicker and easier way of getting this high than toting a pack and a gun up a mountain."

" You seem to be getting along all right," said the Padre.

" Oh, I can take it. There's life in the old dog yet."

In actual fact I was almost at my last gasp when we finally entered the village compound. In the Air Force they would say I was " on my knees ". I dumped my pack on the verandah of the Inspection Bungalow and really got on my knees.

The Bish pillowed his head on his pack and delivered to no one in particular a long peroration on the futility of war. The twinkle in his eye wrote *sic* to all he said. Like the rest of us, he considered all Japs a trifle unnecessary. He thought the world of these rough, swearing Englishmen, who would cheerfully shoot any Jap they met in battle and use his helmet for boiling tea.

Whilst we sprawled on the verandah, eating our half-ration breakfasts, we had visitors. The Gaumbaras appeared to pay their respects and brought presents of *dzu*, rice and a chicken. Their children came with them and stared at us as they clung to their fathers' G-strings. The royal families squatted on the grass. They evinced great interest in our clothes and weapons, and intently watched our every small action. We passed around our cigarettes and discovered the Naga's greatest vice. An aged grandfather, dandling a child of less than two years on his knee, took a few puffs of the precious weed and passed it on to his delighted charge who handled it as adroitly as a Merseyside dock-labourer. The Bish, overcome with awe, took a back seat. These children can drink too. I saw mere babes in arms scorn their mother's breast and satisfy their thirst from a *chatthi* of rice-beer.

I showed the boys—there were no females present ; this was strictly stag—my binoculars, and they gurgled with delight when I allowed them to look through the lens. The fathers, too,

unable to restrain their curiosity, abandoned their royal dignity and wrangled with their offspring for possession of the binoculars. Their exclamations of wonder and amazement were no less than the children's.

An old man leading a small child pushed his way through the throng and addressed us volubly, punctuating his peroration with jabs of his bony fore-finger into the solar plexus of the grinning babe. Tommy Tabashi came to our rescue. The child, it appeared, had a jungle-sore on his leg. Would we cure it with our medicine? We said, certainly we would cure it, and unearthed our first-aid knapsack. That was the start of a Sick Parade. Every man and child in the village suddenly developed a complaint, ranging from wens and goitres to jungle-sores and asthma. We thanked our lucky stars that the female of the species was not, as yet, in evidence. The M.O. was not with our small band and none of us felt qualified to deal with mysterious female complaints. We smeared salve and bandaged wounds and consulted each other with the gravity of Harley Street men. The wens and goitres were a problem until I discovered that the patients were quite satisfied with a glucose tablet from my ration packet. It *looked* like medicine and that was all they cared.

So much for our "Good Neighbour" policy. We had shown ourselves to be genial and established a reputation as friends of the Hill-folk.

Bill Fazackerley and I decided to inspect the area with a view to laying our flare-path. Before we departed, however, a message from the Colonel arrived by Naga runner. I opened it and read:

"Wizard prang tomorrow same time five of your pals."

"Wizard prang", of course, is an Air Force term the column had borrowed from me. Its meaning is rather elastic, but the Colonel used it in this instance as a suitable code-name for the supply-drop. The name stuck and after this a "drop" was usually referred to as a "prang". I said to Bill and the Bish:

"The drop is off until nine tomorrow morning. Five aircraft are coming."

Bill said: "Well, that gives us more time. Let's go and pick our site."

We left the Bish negotiating with the Gaumbaras for rice and pigs to feed the column, as our rations were getting short.

The village stretched for about three-quarters of a mile along a knife-edge ridge. It was merely a track bounded on both sides by a row of bamboo huts. The village women did not hide as we passed through, as they had done at Bandheri, but were very busily occupied pounding and sifting rice. Their children played among the huts. The village gossips were talking scandal at the street-doors very much as they do at home. They just stared at us as we went by.

There were some graves in the centre of the compound which we examined with interest. They were mounds of earth fenced in with interlaced bamboo and adorned with the personal effects of the deceased, such as spears, *lapoks*, blankets, earthen pots and dried maize. As we inspected the graves, an ancient one appeared. He grinned at us, displaying toothless gums, and spoke in the Lotah dialect, wheezing at some hidden joke. His oratory was above our heads as we had left Tabashi behind to help the Bish in his speculations on the rice market. We tried bastard Urdu. It registered not. We seemed to be getting into a rut. I gave him a cigarette and we moved off, but the Ancient was loath to lose such excellent company and begged us to stay. His association with us had put him in the lime-light and there he intended to remain. "Just a social climber," said Bill, snobbishly.

"Excuse, please," said a voice. We turned. It was Tommy, our Tabashi, and we thanked a thoughtful Providence and a worried Padre who at that moment was relying on very precise English to put over a rice deal with five grinning Gaumbaras.

I told Tommy our requirements and added that I also wanted a strip of ground suitable for a light 'plane to use as a landing strip. He ruminated over this, cutting it down to the Naga conception of aeronautics, and translated it to the Ancient, who wheezed, tore off a few bars of Lotah, and dived into a nearby hut. "He said you must please wait," explained Tommy. "He wants to lock up his hut."

The Ancient reappeared, grinning broadly. We goggled at him, scarcely believing our eyes. On his head he wore an old khaki, woollen cap-comforter and pinned to his blanket were corporal's stripes and a brightly coloured ribbon with its medal.



The medal bore the inscription " Northumberland Fusiliers, 1914-18 ". We asked for an explanation and learned that the Ancient had been in France with a Naga Labour Battalion during the Great War. Our primitive Ancient was an old Army man ! He was careful to explain, through Tommy, that as a soldier he could not be seen around the village in our company without his insignia and military regalia. We felt honoured.

We explored the entire ridge and were extremely discouraged by the Ancient's idea of a landing-strip. There was no ground flat enough, long enough, broad enough, nor with suitable approaches for a light 'plane to land and take-off. I was also disappointed in my efforts to find a good dropping-zone and finally decided to make do with a small hill at the end of the ridge. In choosing such a site there must be no hills so close that an aircraft may meet with disaster on its low-flying circuit of the flare-path. As the expedition was entirely in mountainous country the choice of a good dropping-zone was strictly limited.

I took a bearing on my pocket compass of the proposed long arm of my L-shaped flare-path and we paced it out, marking the position of each bonfire. Bill's platoon would come later and build the fires ready for lighting on the approach of the aircraft. We did the same for the short arm.

On our way back to the I.B. the Chief Gaumbara, a very old, shrivelled little man, called to us from his hut. We had not been introduced up to this time, so we went over to pay our respects. He was, explained our interpreter, very glad to meet us, and he apologised for not coming to the I.B. with his subordinate headmen ; his advanced years imposed severe restrictions upon his movements, etc. His face was very wrinkled. If we had considered the Ancient a bit on the over-ripe side, we now changed our minds. This dear old soul could have been present when the Ancient was christened. We waved aside his apologies as being unnecessary.

He lowered himself from his wooden bench with an effort and bade us follow him across the compound. Tommy said :

" He wants you to try his *dzu* which he says is the finest in the village."

The Gaumbara entered a store-house and we waited outside until he emerged with a bottle. It was the first and only bottle

I saw in the Hills apart from the Indian doctor's, and, oddly enough, it bore a German label extolling the fine quality of a Berliner *bier*.

The chief insisted we drink the whole bottle. The earthen bowl he produced in lieu of a glass did not look as clean as it might be, but he was the village chief and our policy was that of Naga's Friend so we couldn't refuse. We drank half each. The Gaumbara was delighted when we told him how wonderful it was, and he dived into the store-house and produced more in a *chatthi*. We were greatly disconcerted. Though not yet connoisseurs of native beverages, we really considered the stuff very mediocre. Besides, we would have been happier if the drinking-vessels had been a little cleaner. We explained to the delightful old toper that, wonderful as his beer was, we couldn't drink more as a white man consumes very little, being the unfortunate possessor of an abnormally small stomach. When Tommy translated this nonsense, the old man looked very disconsolate, but he insisted we must have just a little more. There was nothing for it but to comply. We drank.

"Well, thanks a lot," we said, wiping our lips.

"More!" said the Gaumbara. "More!"

"Oh, well, er, oh! all right."

The vessel became half-empty.

"More!" yelled the toper.

"Bill," I said, "we must take a firm line. There is a limit to a guest's obligations."

"Well, you tell him," said the heartless Fazackerley.

I sighed at such a lack of *esprit de corps* and resorted to subterfuge. I held my stomach and groaned loudly, until Bill said I was overdoing it.

"The officer has a stomach ache," said Tommy Tabashi.

"What he needs," said the callous old moron, "is *dzu*. *Dzu* is a very fine medicine."

Something snapped within me.

"Listen," I snarled, "I don't like your filthy *dzu*, and as far as I am concerned you can . . . !"

"The officer says, 'No, thanks'," translated the tactful Tabashi.

A voice hailed us. We were saved. It was the Colonel and Tony Firth. The column had arrived earlier than we had anticipated.

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The bonfires were burning. Three men of Captain Fazackerley's platoon stood beside a plentiful supply of green foliage and grass near each fire, ready to pile it on the flames when I signalled for smoke.

I stood on the brow of the hill, Very pistol in hand, awaiting the aircraft. From where I stood, in the centre of the flare-path, I could see my radio-set where Sgt. Corkett was listening out for a call from the aircraft. Men and mules and a crowd of excited Nagas pressed into service as coolies lined the ridge further back, waiting to pick up the bundles after the drop. I was in touch with column H.Q., which was back at the I.B., by means of a 48 pack-set operated by Hammond, an Army Signals man.

I looked at my wrist-watch ; it showed ten to nine. I scanned the sky through borrowed binoculars. The weather was far from being good. Thick leaden-grey clouds shrouded the higher peaks and threatened to engulf our own area. We had been having rain showers off and on all morning and I hoped the low cloud, which was about eight- to nine-tenths in the west, would not discourage the supply-fliers.

My binoculars picked up a few tiny dots in the sky. I counted three, four, five—five aircraft. They came nearer and I recognised them as D.C. 3's, so, picking up my Very pistol, I called, "Smoke!" and went down the hill to my set, as the thick smoke billowed up from the flare-path fires. Sgt. Corkett looked up as I approached. I said :

"Picked anything up yet?"

He said: "Not yet, sir. They're probably keeping R/T silence."

The leading Dakota orbited my flare-path and I fired a green Very. The pilot flashed the air-to-ground recognition letter and I replied on the Aldis lamp. He turned for the approach and came in, flying at about four hundred feet. We watched the stachutes as they fell from the open door in the side where we could see the figures of two men manhandling the heavy baskets of supplies. The aircraft dropped seven bundles and banked to port for another run. Meanwhile, the others were coming in, one at a time. Don Britton stood beside me and counted the stachutes as they floated down. His job was to keep a tally on all supplies, and, when they were collected, to see that everyone got his fair share.

The Nagas were delighted. They shrieked with excitement whenever a statchute landed near them, and their joy knew no bounds when one statchute snapped its guylines and sent its heavy basket crashing to earth, where it landed within a few feet of Tony Firth, who beat all records for the hundred yards sprint.

Hammond called up to me. "Col. Stevens on the set for you, sir." I said: "O.K.," and went down to him. I called the Colonel.

"Hello, Number Nine."

"Catseyes?" (My code-name.)

"Speaking, sir."

"How's it going?"

"Very well, sir. I reckon they're just about finished. A few 'chutes drifted but Donald has sent some Nagas into the nullah to retrieve them. They were dropped too high."

"O.K.," said the Colonel, "Norman wants to speak to you. Hold on."

I held on. Captain Wright, in charge of Army Signals, came on the air. He said: "Hello, Norman here. What about that flare-path of yours? Can a light 'plane land all right?"

I could scarcely believe my ears. "What?"

"Would a Stinson be able to land where you have your dropping-zone?"

"Judas Priest!" I yelled, "a kite-hawk couldn't even land on it! It's a mountain."

A scream of delight arose from the Nagas and I looked up just in time to see a statchute come swinging down towards us. I gave Hammond a push, yelled "Cheerio!" into the microphone and dived headlong for the friendly shelter of a clump of bamboo. The parachute shroud settled gently over the 48 set, damaging nothing.

It was the last run. The Dakota waggled its wings and climbed to join its companions who were circling above. They headed south-west for home.

The area was littered with baskets and white statchutes. Donald's men were already loading them on the mules and organising coolie-parties of Nagas to bring up those further down the mountain-side. I went back to the R.A.F. set and helped the boys pack it on the mule. We had not used it; the aircraft

had not asked for a homing and since the drop had been successful there was no need to direct it from the ground.

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Two days had passed since the supply-drop. We were still at Sanis, awaiting orders from Brigade H.Q. regarding our next move. I was expecting the arrival of a light 'plane of Col. Cochrane's Command that morning. We had asked for delivery of five thousand silver rupees with which we could reward the Hillmen for their services.

The sky was clear and the mountain air cool and sweet to breathe. No sign of the ominous monsoon clouds. As far as the eye could see, in every point of the compass, stretched a panorama of green nullahs and blue hills. A villager stood beside me, looking down into the valley. He was short in stature but well-proportioned, broad of shoulder and muscular—a typical Hillman. A primitive—untutored, uncivilized—yet he seemed to say: "This is the roof of the world. This is *my* home." It was the only world he knew and the only world he cared about. He was happy enough. But now his peace was violated. Not by the white men; they were friendly enough. They came out of the plains and brought many strange things with them, such as boxes that talked, fire that shone and didn't burn, and shotguns far more powerful than the Gaumbara's at Tseminyu or the one the missionary brought from *Cal-cut* in India. It was the white men gave them the good white cloth that came out of the machines in the sky. The white men were generous. It was the yellow men who came out of Burma, those whom the English called *Japani*, who were burning the villages in the south and pillaging the food stocks. They were in those hills across the valley, at Wokha and maybe nearer, and the whole village knew the white soldiers were going to fight them.

Away in the distance, at Kohima, I could hear the dull boom of big guns. The defenders of Kohima were fighting like madmen.

I woke from my reverie. Two light 'planes, Stinson Sentinels, were droning towards us. I had marked our position with a large white letter "A" made of parachute-cloth, easily visible to the approaching aircraft. They circled

overhead and I fired a "green" from my signal pistol, whereupon one of the aircraft banked steeply and came in, leaving its companion to act as look-out and "Get-away Charlie" in case of trouble. He flew overhead on a dummy run, seemed satisfied about our identity and turned in again, flying very low. The "second dicky" was leaning out of the side window, holding a canvas bag. As he passed over he dropped the bag and waved his hand in a cheery greeting. I gave him the Victory Sign—the one Mr. Churchill cleaned up a bit in '41—and watched the bag drift down on its small parachute. The aircraft joined its look-out man and they flew away over the mountains.

#### CHAPTER 4

### WOKHAVI

The sun sank lower in the west. Major Firth and I sat in the Inspection Bungalow, striving to decode messages from Base. The hour of "stand-to" was approaching.

Suddenly, a sharp explosion rent the stillness. Tony said: "God! What was that?" He dropped the cypher-key and we went outside. The others were looking down into the nullah. Somebody said: "It came from Baron's position, Tony. Sounds like one of his bloody booby-traps."

The Baron's platoon was situated on a knoll overlooking a small footpath which had been booby-trapped to prevent a surprise attack.

The Colonel said: "You'd better go down, Tony, and see what it is."

Tony belted on his '38. He said: "There's someone coming up now, sir."

A man came over the compound. He was panting with exertion. He gasped: "It's Mr. Munro, sir! He's badly hurt—walked into a booby-trap!"

The Colonel snapped: "Get the Doctor, Tony, quickly!"

Tony and the Doctor hurried down the mountain-side, taking a groundsheet for use as a stretcher. A gloom hung over the small party of officers now. Jock Munro was very popular, and we were shaken by the serious nature of the accident.

We looked on in silence as Jock was brought up. The Doctor's face was pale and showed no promise. He shook his head grimly in answer to the C.O.'s unspoken question. Poor Jock. He was in awful pain, but his great, lovable Scottish soul allowed no murmur to escape his tight-clamped lips. The Doctor worked for two hours, amputating the shattered limbs, fighting hard to save the life of his brother-officer, but it was no use. He left the make-shift operating theatre and came to where we sat. His face was serious and streaked with sweat. He said: "Jock's gone," and went outside to pace about in the cool night air. I felt sorry for him; he had done his utmost to win what he knew was a losing battle. I looked at my watch; it showed twenty minutes past nine.

A message came through from Headquarters. It read: "55 Col. approaching Sanis. 76 Col. will proceed Wokha earliest possible." The Colonel said: "We'll leave tomorrow, after the supply-drop."

"Sitreps" had been coming in all day, giving the positions of our own troops and locations of enemy units. All the columns were in the Hills now, fanning out for the big drive down the long range from north to south.

I took the supply-drop at 09.00 hours the following morning. This time I chose as my site the village itself. The compound of the village was longer and broader than my previous site and there was less risk of losing any of the precious bundles. The drop was successful, if a little hair-raising due to the obstinacy of one pilot—obviously a "rookie"—who persisted in flying *across* the flare-path, dropping his statachutes to form a formidable barrage in the path of the other machines. It was some time before Sgt. Corkett could contact the aircraft's frequency to enable me to correct his crazy flying. None of the villager's huts were damaged by the drifting baskets and I decided that all future drops would be taken in the villages, provided no more suitable ground was available. (It so happened that almost all the drops I organised were on villages, since such a place usually occupied the highest peak in the area and its compound was often the broadest and longest strip of ground in this impossible country. The inhabitants did not mind in the least. They turned out in force to watch each drop, which for them was a pre-war Hendon display. What slight damage was done to huts was always a source of amusement to the Nagas, whilst

the good-humoured owners were compensated with parachutes and empty supply-baskets.)

The burial of Captain Munro was performed after the supply-drop, at 12.30 hours. A sad gathering heard the Padre read the burial-service. Not a man stirred and the watching Nagas were silent and impressed by the solemnity of the occasion. A rough wooden cross marked the grave in the bungalow compound.

My next job that day was a message pick-up. A light 'plane of the American Air Force was expected at four p.m. to "snatch" some Japanese documents Hugh Bond had brought to Sanis. They were considered to be highly important and were required by the Intelligence Staff at H.Q.

I chose as my pick-up site a spur running at right-angles from the ridge on which we camped. It was ideal since there were no obstructions preventing low flying. There were, however, two or three trees on the spur which needed to be removed, and this the Commandos accomplished with the use of explosives. Two straight lengths of bamboo, some fifty-five feet long, were brought up the hill by Nagas. I nicked the tops of these with my jack-knife and ran a long length of parachute cord through the nicks. Red flags were next tied to the tops of the bamboo so that they might easily be distinguished by the low-flying pilot. The poles were raised and planted in the ground about sixteen paces apart, and the ends of the 'chute cord tied together to form a continuous loop.

Whilst this work was going on the Colonel came along with the message.

He said: "What are the chances of these aircraft arriving before four?"

I said: "Very little, I'm afraid, sir. If they said four—four it'll be."

"H'm. I wanted to get the column away as soon as we were packed up. You don't think they'll come after four?"

"Not much after, if they're late at all. They run pretty well to schedule. If you want to push off, sir, I can stay behind with a couple of men to see that everything goes off well."

The Colonel mused. He said: "Right! I do want to get this off—it's very important. Choose your men and come



along as soon as you're finished. You know the route we're taking."

"Yes, sir. Wokha, track down the hill on the far side."

He returned to the I.B. and I sent a man along to the Commando sergeant with the names of four men I wished to remain behind. The work proceeded.

At five minutes to four I heard First Whistle and could see the column assembling in the village for the march out. Almost immediately afterwards we heard the low hum of the approaching Sentinels. The Colonel heard it, too, for he stopped the column and went to the edge of the plateau where he could look down on our spur and watch the snatch.

I fired a green and the pick-up aircraft left its look-out man and approached the spur. A line with a small weight attached was trailing behind and below the 'plane, and as he came nearer I could see the second dickey leaning out of his window with the other end of the line in his hands. The weight just touched the top of my pick-up loop as the Sentinel flew over. It banked to port and came in again, this time a little lower. Nice timing! The weighted line struck the top of the loop and wound round it and, as the 'plane flew on, the loop, with message attached, was pulled clear of the poles. We watched the aircraft as it orbited the spur and saw the message-satchel pulled bit by bit into the cockpit. The pilot flew overhead once more and wagged his wings to indicate that the message was safely aboard.

I bawled to the C.O.: "Message safe."

He shouted back: "Nice work."

I retrieved the flags from the poles for future use and went back to the I.B. in time to join the column before it left.

We bivouacked that night in a nullah. There was no stream near at hand so our water was strictly rationed. Enemy patrols were known to be in the vicinity and the column was enjoined to silence, the lighting of fires and cigarettes being forbidden, because our camp was not, strategically, soundly situated. Hills surrounded us and the nullah was bare of trees, but it was the best we could do that night. We were cloaked by darkness, however, and as long as we did nothing to betray our position we were reasonably safe.

After "Orders" I lay on my groundsheet to sleep. We intended to move off before dawn the next morning in an effort

to reach higher ground, so it was advisable to get as much sleep as possible. It was very dark and I could barely make out the line of the surrounding hills. As I looked a light flashed off and on from the nearby footslopes. It winked again—and again. Long, short, short—long, long—dots and dashes! Morse code! I sat up. D-O-Q-Z-P-! Someone on the footslopes, I decided, was sending a message in code. But who? And to whom? I rose quickly and headed through the gloom to where the Colonel sat. It was about a hundred and twenty yards away and in the darkness I tripped several times over sleeping men and resting mules. I swore at the night and wondered if my bearing was correct. Someone said, very quietly: "Who's there?" I whispered: "R.A.F. Officer. Do you know where the Colonel is?" The voice answered: "I'm here, old boy. What do you want?"

I reported the Morse message and the C.O. said: "O.K. I'll have Tony warn the men. Can you see it now?"

"No, sir."

I walked away a few steps and suddenly the light flashed again. This time it seemed much closer—too much closer. It came nearer and then a new realization dawned upon me. I went back to the C.O.

"Sir," I said, "we have another enemy in these hills."

"What's that?"

"Fire-flies," I answered, "rotten, bloody, scheming little fire-flies."

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We arrived at Yekhum at one o'clock midday. Yekhum, a small collection of huts, was the only village before Wokha. Graham Tedd and his platoon, from 33 Column, were already at Yekhum. They had also patrolled Wokha and reported the presence of a fairly strong force of Japanese in the town. The enemy had occupied a height overlooking the town and approaches to it. They were well dug-in and it would need more than one platoon to get them out.

Yekhum, too, had already seen the enemy. When Graham had walked into the village yesterday at the head of his men he surprised three Japs who fled before they could be apprehended. The platoon pursued them but the jungle swallowed them up. A systematic search of the area brought nothing to light. The

wily Nips were wearing white gowns over their uniforms. At a distance these would look like Nagas' blankets.

I was hoping to find suitable ground for an air-strip at Wokha, so I buttonholed one of Graham Tedd's men and questioned him about the terrain.

"Yes, sir," said the Tommy, confidently. "There's a football pitch at Wokha should do for a 'plane to land on."

"A football pitch?"

"Yes, sir. About five 'undred yards long and two 'undred yards broad. It belongs to the missionary school."

"Any high ground overlooking it?"

"No. There *is* a hill at one end but it's a good distance off, and there's only a valley at the other."

This sounded reassuring. I got out my map.

"What about this height here?" I asked, stabbing my finger at the hill now occupied by the Japs.

"That's on the other side of the valley, sir," he said. "Quite a long way off."

"You're positive an aeroplane could land and take off again without hitting any high ground?"

"Absolutely positive." The man was adamant.

What luck! Five hundred yards by two hundred—I could get more if I could lay my strip across it diagonally. I reported it to the Colonel. He said: "Good show! We may need it. Denis Simmonds is taking his company on to Wokha today to try and clear it before we arrive tomorrow. We may have casualties to be evacuated."

Major Simmonds, the big, genial, Irish Company-Commander, looked up from his map. He said: "Get me a nice big Dakota—all to myself. I want to go to Calcutta."

Tony Firth said: "You'll need one for your large-sized feet."

They were always dickering, these two. Great friends, but verbal enemies; they loved to argue and scarcely bothered themselves with trivialities, such as Truth. When Denis is finally hanged, Tony will be the world's worst liar.

Major Simmonds' company, known to the column as Ponce Force, left Yekhum at three-thirty that afternoon. Donald Britton and I spent the afternoon making up our message for the next supply-drop.

*Opposite · Naga Hillmen armed with Shotguns  
and Nagas bringing in Parachute Bundles from the Jungle*





An Angami Naga family in a makeshift house.

We left Yekhum at 07.00 hours the following morning. The march was fairly easy compared with our former travels; the mountain road was comparatively level. Even so, we had our casualties, due to heat stroke. Now and again a man would drop out, absolutely exhausted. The M.O., Donald Gunn, and his sergeant would throw off their packs and administer aid. If the man's condition was not too serious he would be put on a pony and his heavy pack added to the burden of some long-suffering mule. When the case was serious a few men would be detailed as body-guard and they would remain with the patient until such time as he was well enough to proceed on pony.

We camped about two miles from Wokha and waited for word from Ponce Force. It came sooner than we expected. The message simply read "Wokhavi". Based on Sir Charles Napier's famous message "Peccavi" (I have "Sind"), this was Denis' way of saying that Wokha was his.

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Ponce Force had taken Wokha without a fight. The Nippon soldiers, hearing of the approach of a "vast army", had evacuated their dug-outs on the height and fled the town. They were extremely well dug-in and, had they chosen to stay, the capture of the hill would have been no easy matter. The small school-house and hospital had been ransacked to provide comfort for the Japs, and they must have been reluctant to leave it all behind. Discretion, however, was the better part of valour—even Japanese valour—and the Supermen fled incontinently. Evidence of their haste was soon forthcoming in the shape of helmets, pieces of equipment, maps, documents, and a jar of hair-brilliantine which stank to high heaven.

Two Nagas showed me the site of a Japanese camp. I was not impressed. It was in the grounds of a Naga temple and the entire area was littered with the feathers of filched chickens, broken egg-shells and the remains of camp-fires. I found two eggs left behind by the late occupants. These I took to my batman who boiled them and served them up for tea. They were bad.

Major Henschman walked into the town as the Colonel was receiving a delegation of chieftains, who had brought the usual presents of fowl, eggs (mostly bad) and *dzu*.

The Major, an enigmatical figure, doomed to stride these pages without further explanation, was a giant of a man, well-proportioned. His face was bearded; he wore no shirt, his dress consisting of a bush-hat, a pair of shorts, socks and army boots. A pistol and a carbine completed his attire.

He was able, good-natured and easy to get along with. He knew the hills from A to Z and seemed to know more about the Japs than they knew themselves. From Wokha, we learned, the enemy had gone to Lungsa, the next village, and then south. It was very likely, however, that Japanese patrols were in the vicinity.

I went out to have a look at the football pitch, the length of ground five hundred yards by two hundred. Had it not been for the rough bamboo goalposts at one end I would never have found it. I paced it out . . . . . it was fifty-five yards long. An infants' football pitch. It was actually a small plateau and made an ideal site for a message pick-up, so I set two small Naga boys to work, who, for one rupee each, hacked off the tops of several trees which stood in my intended line-of-flight. I tackled a gum-tree which grew on the edge of the plateau and slashed a V-cut with my kukri.

A stream of liquid gum shot from the wound into my eyes. This caused me awful agony and blinded my eyes with tears, a state of affairs which lasted more than two hours, during which I ran a high temperature.

The following morning a light 'plane arrived and snatched a satchel of reports and captured documents. The rest of the day, until four o'clock, I spent in patrolling the district with two men of the Commando platoon, looking for a landing strip. Again I was disappointed. Ground which through the binoculars held promise proved, on closer inspection, unsuitable. We slashed our way through almost impenetrable jungle as we descended into the nullah. The ground would fall away steeply and we used creepers and tree-branches Tarzan-fashion to make the descent. It was hot work and we sweated freely. Where we came to a jungle path we trod warily. The enemy had been here and we were well aware of the use of booby-traps. An almost invisible wire across the path, a creeper, a dead branch,

almost anything in the way of an unwary foot may be a one-way ticket to Eternity. One method, beloved of the Japanese, is to place a grenade with the pin removed in a small tin, the side of the tin holding down the lever. The tin is tied firmly to a tree about five or six feet from the ground and is hidden by foliage. A very thin wire, fastened at one end to the grenade, is run down the tree-trunk and across the track where it is secured about six inches from the ground. Should the foot of a traveller strike the wire the grenade is pulled out of the tin, freeing the lever and making a sticky mess of the traveller.

We walked Indian file with about five paces between each man, myself leading. Where it was possible we walked off the track. It was more difficult on the feet but easier on the nerves.

At four o'clock we returned to the column. I reported failure to the Colonel but asked permission to ride a pony down the Lungsa track where I had seen through my binoculars a likely-looking site. The C.O. was agreeable but only on condition I was accompanied by another man, there still being enemy patrols in the vicinity. I am a poor horseman so I chose a groom to accompany me and we set off without delay.

We arrived at the site, which was about two miles from Lungsa, and dismounted. The groom stayed with the mounts and I climbed the hill on which the site stood. The ground was bare except for a few burned stumps of trees and I quickly realized that the top of the hill was much too small for a landing-strip. As I stood silhouetted against the sky-line a shot rang out and I heard the whine of a bullet. I dived behind a blackened tree-stump. Somebody evidently considered me an excellent target against the bare brown ridge and the sky. I waited but there was no second shot so I quickly made my way down to the track, where the groom was waiting. He grinned and said: "Somebody taking a pot at you, sir?"

I said: "Yes, let's get back—there's no peace around here."

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We were four days at Wokha, during which we had another supply-drop. The enemy were not using aircraft to bring up supplies but their big convoys of motor transport came over the hills from the Chindwin every night. They were using the



track that straggled west to Kohima. We were still a long way from this road but H.Q.'s aim was to cut it with eight columns and deny its use to the Japanese.

At 07.30 hours on April 24, the column left Wokha and marched south to Kotsenyu, a distance of twelve miles. Kotsenyu was in Rengma Naga territory. A small village, it stood on a peak, 4,200 feet above sea level. Here again was evidence of Naga friendship. The Rengmas gave us the Freedom of the Village. Every family tendered half of its mean hut as a billet ; an offer accepted with alacrity in view of the increased downpour of the rains.

The monsoon was now in earnest. The enemy was relying on the heavy rains to keep us out of action and prevent our aircraft bringing supplies. Their intention was to take Kohima and sit out the monsoon, which they were confident would keep the "decadent" British out of the Hills and the Air Force grounded. As the monsoon raged and the days went by, they changed their minds. Dakotas dropped food and ammunition to the British, who still fought and lived in the rain-soaked jungles ; diving Hurricanes continued to fling their merciless bombs on the harassed Nipponese. It was the Japanese Air Force that was grounded ; the few 'planes that did leave their bases in Burma were badly mauled by British guns and fighters. The enemy, by this time, was getting desperate. Again and again they launched their weight on Kohima, but the defenders hurled them back. The only part of the town they could capture was the Naga village on the outskirts. But the situation was serious indeed for the town's defenders, who were now rationed to a pint of water per day.

The Japanese had been to Kotsenyu. They were in the little village the day before we arrived. A small party had walked in and demanded rice. The Gaumbara had protested, but they threatened to shoot him and burn the village if the food was not forthcoming. The rice was taken away on mules to Tseminyu, ten miles away. The enemy had a store-house in Tseminyu where they kept all the food filched from surrounding villages, in preparation for a move north.

It was decided we should attack Tseminyu that night. Major Henchman, who had rejoined us that day, offered to lead the way. He knew the district well and his Naga spies had reported the enemy positions. The village was not strongly

held and it was agreed that two platoons could take it with a surprise attack. There was a likelihood of the column suffering casualties, of course, so I set off with a section of Burma Rifles to look at a piece of ground four miles away in the hope that it might be of use to small aircraft.

Again we were torn and scratched by thick jungle, and at one place had to lower ourselves over a rock-face into a chasm by means of a long rope of parachute cords which I usually carried on my belt for use on such occasions. Again, too, the site was useless, and I returned in disgust. Air-strips were proving exceedingly difficult to find in the Hills.

On the way back to Kotsenyu we heard, through the trees, the sound of voices pitched low and the splashing of water. I signed to the men to proceed cautiously. The havildar stooped and picked something from the grass. He disclosed it to me; a red cloth patch with three embroidered yellow stars—the rank badge of a Japanese soldier. I parted the undergrowth before me and looked into a small valley, half expecting to see the enemy.

Instead I saw two very naked young Naga ladies disporting themselves in a stream. They were very plump and well-shaped, though their shaven heads—a sign of virginity among the Naga tribes—were not exactly beau ideal. My havildar, a native of the Chin Hills, must have been impressed, however, for he gave a chuckle which I can only describe as lecherous. The bathers heard him and looked up. They screamed as they saw us, and dashed to the bank where they stood modestly hiding their nakedness behind blankets.

I looked sternly at the delighted havildar to discourage unseemly behaviour, and beckoned the men to follow me down to the stream. We filled our water-bottles and prepared to move off again. The maidens were still gazing at us with wide eyes, so I asked the havildar if he could make himself understood to them. He said he thought he could, being a Chin and blood-brother to the Nagas, so I said: "Then ask the way to the village of Kotsenyu, as it seems they must know of a path."

He tried but had little success. I wondered if he was confining his questions to suit my specific command. The Nagas are very insular folk, however, and each tribe has its own language, so that a Lotah village will not readily understand the tongue of a Rengma village though they may be only ten

miles apart. It was unlikely, then, that a Chin would make himself understood among Nagas, blood-brother or not.

I found the track myself. It led up hill and down dale, through paddy fields and across maize fields, where now and then some worker, looking up from his crops, would see us passing and join our wake. When I eventually reached Kotsenyu it was at the head of a young army consisting of eight Burris\*, an ancient grandfather, five Naga stalwarts bearing spears, and an assortment of male and female workers of all ages and sizes.

## CHAPTER 5

### TSEMINYU

The following afternoon, as I returned from organizing a message pick-up, I glanced into the hut appropriated by the M.O. as a First Aid Post. My look was reciprocated by a scowl from a swarthy-looking individual who sat nursing a bandaged head.

"What on earth is that?" I asked a grinning B.O.R. who stood on guard at the entrance.

"A Jap, sir," he answered. "Mr. Bond sent him in from Tseminyu."

"Have we any casualties?"

"Just one, sir. Bloke shot in the leg. He's coming up the track on a stretcher, and the M.O.'s gone off on a 'orse to meet him."

I climbed the slope to the hut we used as Headquarters. Tony Firth was standing outside talking to a small, pleasant-faced young Chinese who wore the rank of Captain on his epaulets.

I nodded and said: "Hello. You'll be Major Henschman's friend, I take it. My name is Wilcox."

"And mine is Ywin," said the stranger in excellent English. He stretched out a hand. "Pleased to meet you."

I said: "I see you've brought one of Tojo's boys in."

Ywin said: "Yes, he's in need of repair. A burly B.O.R. cracked him over the head with a rifle-butt and that doesn't do anybody any good."

He told me the story of the attack on Tseminyu the previous night. The party of B.O.R.'s led by Major Henschman, Hugh

\* Burma Rifles.

Bond and Capt. Ywin, had silently climbed the 4,600 ft. peak at dead of night. It was a very steep and tiring climb and the men were exhausted when they neared the summit. A halt was called until they got their second wind. As they waited, scarcely daring to breathe, a naked figure detached itself from the shadows and approached.

Henchman rose and went to meet the newcomer, gun in hand. It was a Naga spy who was to be their guide. The Japanese, he said, were asleep in the I.B. just above their heads. There was a sentry guarding the path to the bungalow. The Chindits decided to deal with the sentry first.

Foot by foot, the small party scaled the remaining few hundred feet until they reached a narrow footpath where they were within throwing distance of the sentry's post which the Naga pointed out. The Jap was not visible in the gloom.

The raiders listened . . . . . they heard nothing. They crawled nearer, eyes straining in the darkness, hearts thumping with excitement, and stopped again. They could barely discern the outline of the sentry. He was sitting at the base of a tree a few feet from where they crouched, his rifle across his knees. The Chindits watched him ; he did not move.

A faint suspicion entered Major Henchman's mind. He stood up and quietly walked towards the sitting figure. Still the Jap appeared unconscious of danger. The Major grinned and beckoned the others to follow. They came on tiptoe and stared down at the sentry whose only greeting was a light snore. Tenno's representative was asleep at his post—an unforgivable crime in any man's army.

Henchman bent and gently removed the rifle, handing it to a B.O.R., and then calmly stirred the sentry from his slumbers with a well-aimed kick in the ribs. The Jap woke and rubbed his eyes, then goggled at the towering frame of the bearded Major. He opened his mouth to yell and a bayonet pricked his throat. Now he was panicky. He grabbed the bayonet and got for his pains a blow on the head from a rifle-butt which knocked him into oblivion.

The Japs in the Inspection Bungalow slept on, ignorant of the raiders who now deployed to attack them. Lt. Bond's men sighted their Bren guns on the verandah and kept watch whilst a party stole up to the bungalow, armed with grenades.

At a given signal the grenades crashed through the grimy windows and burst among the startled Japs. Pandemonium broke loose and the night air was alive with the screams of wounded and dying. The rattle of Sten and Bren and the crack of rifles added to the bedlam as the doors of the bungalow spewed scared, half-dressed soldiers into the compound. Many dropped before the hail of bullets; others crouched and fired back, but were soon induced to seek the shadows of the jungle.

The giant Henchman hoisted himself through a window and dropped into the bungalow, where he faced three bewildered Japs who were afraid to brave the storm outside. Before they could lift their weapons Henchman's gun barked two-three-four times, fired from the hip. Two of them fell, the third fled. The Major picked up a spare machine-gun barrel and left by the window.

Soon the compound was empty of Japanese, save those who lay dead. The Chindits moved in. Their only casualty was one man wounded, but the Naga guide was dead. Some had seen him die, wrestling, unarmed, with an escaping Jap who fired savagely into his body with a pistol.

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Lt.-Col. Stevens had gone to Tseminyu, where the enemy were still thought to be gathering their remnants on the height overlooking that important village.

Lieutenant Steve Dunn, the Intelligence Officer, was busy-interrogating the sullen prisoner, the sentry with the bandaged head.

I was lying on a plank bed in the Headquarters hut, eating my evening ration and talking to Ywin when a soldier walked in and reported that the Colonel wished to speak to Major Firth on the R/T set. Tony went out to the set. He came back in a few minutes and said to me: "C.O. wants you at Tseminyu tonight. He wants an air-drop there in the morning. You'd better take a pony or you'll never make it before dark."

I looked at my watch; it was less than an hour before dusk.

I said: "I'll get going right away. Can you have a horse ready for me, Doug?"

Captain Deyes nodded and went outside. I packed quickly. Tony said: "I don't think you'll be there before dark."

"I hardly think so—I can't ride."

"Then be very careful. Our chaps are at Milestone 32 now, two miles from the village. There may be enemy in the village itself—we aren't sure on that point—so don't go further than M.S. 32."

I said: "Who's coming with me?"

"A groom. He's outside now."

I went outside and mounted and the groom and I rode down the hill-side out of the village. Time was getting short and we had to ride quickly. Unused to the saddle I found a gallop extremely disconcerting on that narrow track with its precipitous drop and sharp corners. A trot I found painful, since I was not in harmony with the quick, sudden jolt of the saddle. I had to beseech the groom, an excellent horseman, to walk his mount at frequent intervals, though dusk was now approaching rapidly.

Soon it was dark and we still had five of the ten miles to cover. Fast riding was now out of the question, much to my relief. We rode carefully, eyes strained to watch the dangerous precipice that ran at our side. Now and then I would discern the shape of a milestone in the gloom and I would call a halt, dismount and trace the number with my fingers. It was in this fashion that I found M.S. 32.

We dismounted and whistled softly. There was no reply. Again and again we whistled. Still no answer from the dark surround. What had happened? Where were our men? We felt decidedly uncomfortable, knowing the enemy were near.

I whispered: "We'll try a little further up the track. Let's go."

So, disregarding Tony's sound advice, we mounted and set off again. The silence was oppressive; every jungle noise made us turn in the saddle.

We rode for about a mile, whistling quietly at odd intervals, but no one challenged us. Suddenly the track forked. I did not expect this, but I felt sure that the left-hand track was the one for us. I mentioned this and the groom headed his horse into the blackness. I turned my horse to follow him. Then without warning the other pony slipped and, with enough noise to waken the Seven Sleepers, horse and rider came crashing through the undergrowth in a flurry of legs and dusty bodies. The groom picked himself up, cursing.

I said: "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes, sir. No damage, but I ache like hell."

"Pony all right?"

"I think so. That path's a bastard. I don't think it is the one we want."

I said: "No, you're probably right. We'll try the other. Hope to heaven nobody heard you."

We turned into the other path, now very close to the village. I wondered if we should go on. There was little use walking into the village if the enemy were there. On the other hand if I was to conduct a supply-drop at nine o'clock the next morning I had to contact the Colonel's party as soon as possible. I resolved to go as near to the village as I dared in the hope of meeting our men. The Japs might not be in the village at all. The uncertainty of it all was extremely annoying.

My pony stopped abruptly. I looked down. At our feet was a wooden bridge over a shallow culvert. I urged the beast on, but it refused to budge.

The groom said: "What's the matter, sir?"

"This damned beast won't cross the bridge."

"That's queer. It's not afraid of bridges and this one looks quite safe."

"Well, it won't cross it."

I looked up. On the skyline almost above our heads I could see a collection of huts, barely visible in the darkness.

I said: "We're very close to the village now, anyway. Let's dismount and walk a bit nearer."

We got down and by pulling on the reins I managed to get the big pony to move across the bridge. It seemed very nervous. My own nerves were keyed up to high pitch as we walked along the track to the village. I was leading, pistol at the ready, and as I walked a quick thought flashed across my mind. Though the gloom was almost all-obscuring I was leading a big, white target known as a horse. I looked at it; the whiteness of its body stood out like the Aurora Borealis. Or so it seemed to me.

We were now on the verge of the village hutments. Barely two hundred yards away we could see a white-walled building, its doorway showing a slice of yellow light like that of a hurricane-lamp. Who were the occupants? Were they white or yellow? Should we go on? I put it to the groom.

"What do you think about it? Shall we investigate?"

He seemed very uncertain; he had a damned good right to be. I thought of Tony Firth's warning. "O.K.," I said, "we'll do this. Return to M.S. 32 and sleep in the jungle at the side of the track. We'll come back here at First Light; then we can see what we are doing."

So we did. We turned and walked our horses back along the track, and when we got to the wooden bridge that hulking white beast of mine shied again.

We managed to get him to cross and rode in silence back to M.S. 32, where we unsaddled the mounts and pitched camp in the damp grass, screened from view by the thick curtain of trees.

I woke a few times during the night and at the first sign of sun-up aroused my companion.

"Saddle up. We won't wait to breakfast."

It was still a misty dawn when we crossed the bridge, pulling and pushing my stubborn mount. We rode cautiously to the outskirts of the village and came upon the white building we had seen during the night. It was the Inspection Bungalow. A few green-clad figures came out to meet us. They were the Colonel's men. All that caution for nothing. I recognized the Baron; he waved a cheery hello.

I said: "I was along here last night. Saw your light and thought you might be Nips so I went back and slept at M.S. 32."

The Baron grinned and waved a huge paw at Tarago, a peak behind the village. He said: "The Japs cleared out of the village. They're probably on Tarago."

I said: "Where's Boy?"

"He's up at the school."

"School?"

"Aye, school. We're an educated lot at Tseminyu."

I followed his directions and rode up to a long, low bungalow. The Colonel came out to meet me. He said: "Hello! Welcome to Tseminyu. Did you see the head?"

"The what, sir?"

"Head. It's stuck on the pole down by the bridge. I've just sent the Gaumbara to have it taken down."

"Do you mean to say there's a man's head stuck on a pole near the bridge, and I've just ridden past it, sir?"



"Yes. I've just learned about it myself. One of the villagers got a little exuberant during the battle yesterday and sliced off a Jap's head. He followed the gentle custom of his forefathers and decorated the entrance to the village with it."

I thought of my pony's reluctance to pass the bridge. So that was it! Unable to see the ghastly trophy in the dark, the poor animal had sensed its presence and been frightened out of its wits.

I told the Colonel the story of my journey the previous night and he laughed.

"You did right. Tony wasn't aware of the situation when you left him."

Major Henschman looked up from his breakfast of eggs. He had a prodigious appetite. He said:

"Well, we did have a scrap here yesterday, but they've gone now. Ywin finished one off with a grenade. He was riddled with bullets and refused to be captured. Every time we approached he let go with a gun."

The Colonel said: "With this."

I looked at the weapon in his hand. It was a British Sten.

I said: "How did he get hold of that, do you suppose?"

"God knows!" said the C.O. "Maybe at Kohima. He had plenty of ammunition too."

"Badly wounded, eh?"

"Like a sieve," replied Hensch. "Hadn't a hope in hell of getting away. These chaps are very fanatical."

I opened a ration-packet and started breakfast. I said: "Who's laying the flare-path for me, sir?"

The Colonel looked up. He was cleaning his Colt '45. He said: "Peter's platoon. Have you any idea where you want it yet?"

"The village looks the best spot as usual. I'll check up as soon as I've finished breakfast, sir."

"Okay," said the "Boy", squinting through the barrel of his Colt.

I finished the frugal meal, got up and went outside. Lt. Peter Goatley was waiting for me. He said: "Hello, old boy. I told my sergeant to report to you when he's breakfasted. Here he comes now."

The pleasant-faced sergeant came up and saluted. He said:

"All ready to go, sir. Any idea where you want the fires?"

"I thought we'd look around the back of the school-house here. It's quite a wide plateau."

We walked over the ground and I measured it out, sighting each position on the compass. It was a perfect site.

The sergeant said: "How many men will you need, sir?"

"Twenty-one—three for each fire. You'd better get them on the job right away. The aircraft are scheduled at nine o'clock but I want the fires lit at eight-thirty, so that we're not caught napping if they come early."

He went off to collect his men. My radio-set was at Kotsenyu, so I decided to use the Army set. I had a Very pistol and cartridges, but no Aldis signalling lamp. However, the rest of the column was expected at Tseminyu before nine, and, in fact, it did arrive at eight-thirty.

When the first Dakotas appeared the flare-path was ready, complete with signalling apparatus. The drop was a great success, and, of course, the entire village turned out to watch it. The children, especially, took an awed interest in the radio-set. I spoke to the leading 'plane. "Hello, Able Baker Jig—this is Victor X-ray Oboe. Are you receiving me?" Back came the reply: "Able Baker Jig to Victor X-ray Oboe—receiving you loud and clear."

"Roger."

I warned them of the possibility of enemy troops on Tarago. There was no hitch, however, and, except for the loss of two baskets, all supplies were landed safely.

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At Tseminyu I found the first, and only, piece of ground in that grim and rugged country which was good enough for an air-strip. Furthermore, it had good approaches for landing. The only snag was that the whole area was wooded. More than eighty trees grew there. The question was, did we need an air-strip badly enough to warrant the hard work involved in clearing the strip? And would we be in Tseminyu long enough to carry out the job? This was the Colonel's pigeon.

I said: "Well, sir, I've found an air-strip at last. But there's a very big snag—it's covered in trees."

"How long is it?" asked the C.O.

"I can get 350 yards out of it at a pinch. That will give me a strip about thirty yards broad. It has good approaches."

"Could a light 'plane land on a strip that long?"

I said: "An L-5 can land and take off on two-fifty yards in the plains. Allowing for increment due to our height I would like about five hundred yards, but if it's a case of make-do I'm content. Decision to land rests with the pilot. You've already seen what the chances are of an air-strip in the hills, sir."

He said: "Yes, pretty grim. What about getting a bulldozer down by glider?"

"Impossible. There's no place for a glider to land because of the trees. It would all have to be coolie work. That would take ages, though the Nagas appear willing enough."

The outcome was that 33 Column had arrived at Wokha and were attempting to widen the track for the use of jeeps, thus making the difficult task at Tseminyu unnecessary. Blondie, too, had hopes of making an air-strip at Wokha. Unfortunately, they found, as I did, that the strip could never be long enough, so the project was abandoned in favour of the jeep-track. Once the road was open sick and wounded could be transported all the way to the air-strip at Mokokchung in the most useful little vehicle World War II has produced. The journey to Mokokchung would be extremely long and dangerous, but there was nothing else for it.

We stayed quite a long time at Tseminyu, and I got to know the villagers and liked them immensely. Their village was the capital of the Rengma country. It boasted five Gaumbaras and quite a large Christian element. Here, as in the other places in the Hills where Christianity had set foot, there were, in reality, two separate villages; the Christian community and the Pagan village.

The head Gaumbara of Tseminyu was a Christian. He was also the community's pastor and was known to us throughout our occupation by that name. He was an efficient little man, the Pastor. Whenever coolies were needed, his was the voice that brought them scurrying to the school-house. Stern but kindly, he was the undisputed King of Tseminyu; his word was law.

The Bish and the Pastor got on fine together—through an interpreter. They discussed their religion and I think the

Rev. Woods found the world's most ardent followers of Christ in that primitive village. There were no Love Houses in the Christian village. Of course, the pagan village had one. This is true of all Pagan Naga communities, as writers have so often mentioned before. The mud-and-bamboo Love House is the meeting place of Naga lovers, where they may intimately know each other before marriage.

It is not for me to approve or disapprove of such a pre-marital prerogative. That is the Nagas' own affair. But I do strongly disapprove and resent the scurrilous insinuations of certain writers, who, having collected their material whilst enjoying the comfort of a Delhi hotel, glibly write of British men who have escaped the rigours of the campaign *in the comfort of a Naga Love House*. This is the character they have painted of the British Tommy who has fought for months in disease-ridden, Jap-infested Burma jungle. The character they have caused to be printed in damning black and white, to be read by wives in far-off England. It may make interesting and romantic reading to learn of the "tired, battle-stained Englishman who finds solace in the arms of a comely Naga maiden," but it is no comfort to the women at home who have waited years for their men.

The tired, battle-stained Englishmen resent it—and little wonder. I can refute these lies. In the months my column spent in the Naga Hills I can vouch with certainty that not one man among us spent his moments of relaxation in a Naga Love House. The Naga people are a kindly race, taken all round—but not in the widest sense can you call their maidens comely. And the filth of a flea-infested primitive hut is far removed from the silk-draped harem of a Hollywood Sheik. Add to this the jealous disposition of a muscular Naga spearman and you have adequate armour against the darts of a misinformed penny-a-line journalist.

The Naga woman? Well, she's not clean in her habits. She washes infrequently; who does not when the water must be carried up a steep mountain-side? Her dress is simply a dirty cloth draped loosely around her body, exposing her breasts. She is not ashamed of her breasts, being a simple, innocent creature, yet they are far from beautiful in their natural state. Her face is flat, her cheek-bones high. Her legs are often

muscular due to constant climbing in her mountainous country. If she is a virgin her scalp is shaven. Hair on the head of a Naga woman is a proud sign of the married state.

They live a contented life ; as virgins, flirting with the boys of the village ; as wives, doting over their cuddly brown babies. The women of the Naga Hills enjoy a status of equality with their menfolk. They work with their men in the paddy that grows on the steep hillside. They pound the rice and their husbands make the *dzu* which they share with the children.

I had no difficulty in securing Naga help to build my message pick-ups. I asked the Pastor to procure six coolies to clear trees from the top of a ridge near the village. These six made short work of the task with their *lapoks*. Now I wanted two lengths of bamboo. These had to be straight and as long as possible, yet not too thick at the base since we had encountered great difficulty in manhandling such heavy poles whilst erecting them.

There was no interpreter handy, but I eventually made them understand with the aid of a number of weird drawings in my note-book. Off the six went to look for bamboo, leaving behind a Gaumbara who was there as foreman.

The Gaumbara and I and two British Tommies sat on the ground to await the return of the coolies. They were gone a long time. Rain was threatening and I wanted to be finished before the downpour started. The Gaumbara and I looked at each other, failing to understand what the other said. Language was a barrier between us. Or so I thought. The Gaumbara looked like my idea of a Bosambo of the River, only shorter. I said, half to myself :

“ Where have these men of yours got to, Bosambo ? ”

He toothed a huge wide grin and his reply shook me completely. He said quite distinctly :

“ *Je non comprez.* ”

“ Wh-a-at ? ” I yelled, scarcely able to believe my ears.

“ Je-non-comprez, je-non-comprez, je-non-comprez. ” He was as pleased as Punch.

“ Where on earth did you pick that up ? ”

“ *Je non comprez,* ” he went on, rocking with glee.

I learned the answer soon afterwards from the Pastor. Bosambo, like the Ancient at Sanis, had been a soldier of the “ Inglis ” Sovereign, during the War to end Wars. Those three

words were the only French he had ever picked up. He was immensely proud of his knowledge, and his exploits and travels had an important place in the sagas of the Tseminyu Nagas.

The message pick-up was finished and the monsoon broke in the night and tore it down. So I built it again . . . and again. It was largely a labour of love, I guess.

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The near-nude, loin-clothed Naga and the Tabashi approached the Colonel and myself.

The Colonel said: "Now what's wrong?"

The Tabashi was a new man; we had left Tommy at Wokha because he was ignorant of the Rengma dialect. He said:

"This man say there is a dead Japan in the nullah, near the stream. The stream is their drinking water."

The Colonel sighed.

"Pollution, eh? How close to the stream?"

"Very near, sir."

"Then it will have to be shifted. Can you do that?" He looked at me.

"Yes, sir. Right away."

"Go down to the I.B., then, and ask Baron for two men as escort. It'll be dark soon and I don't want you down there alone."

I went to the I.B. It was heavily blasted from the attack; its walls pitted with bullet-holes. There was a considerable amount of captured equipment lying on the verandah; mostly helmets, clothing and split-toed boots. I souvenired a helmet.

The Baron gave me an escort and, collecting a handful of coolies, we followed the Tabashi and his naked friend down into the nullah.

I have a poor stomach for dead bodies and it was with considerable misgivings that I approached the stream, trying to look unconcerned.

We followed the course of the stream a little way and then I saw the body.

Now, I did not mind seeing the body at a distance and approaching it slowly, but this was so sudden that I was quite startled. The dusk was deepening, throwing pools of shadow

beneath the trees, and the stark, white body caught my eye with a suddenness that was frightening. I could almost hear the thunderous crash of incidental music.

The corpse lay stiff and rigid on its stomach, its feet embracing the bole of a tree. There was a deep red gash in its back, horribly accentuated by the parched whiteness of the skin. The chin was missing ; shot away. The body was nude but for a pair of underpants.

This soldier of the much vaunted Japanese Imperial Army had run—and run fast. It was surprising he could have travelled so far in that difficult country with such severe wounds.

My stomach retched inwardly, but I kept a straight face. I said : “ Let’s get him out of here.”

I indicated a spot removed from the stream.

“ Bury him there and work quickly. It’s getting dark.”

The Nagas dug at the soft earth with their *lapoks*. Hurriedly, they prepared a grave some three feet deep.

I motioned them to inter the body. They shook their heads and muttered among themselves.

I said : “ What’s the matter, Tabashi ?”

He replied : “ They won’t touch it with their hands, sir. They want a rope.”

Luckily I had a length of statachute cord which I kept wound around my waist. It had often proved useful. I unwound it. I was not prepared for what happened next.

The Nagas took the cord and, lassoing the corpse’s neck, unceremoniously dragged it across the ground to the grave. The jawless head lolled to one side and seemed to grin in the dusk. The two B.O.R.’s, hardened though they were, were shaken by the spectacle. I heard one say : “ Oh, Christ !”

I turned my head and silently spewed.

## CHAPTER 6

### *H.M.S. THORA PICCHE*

It was at Tseminyu that sickness overtook the column. One by one the men reported stomach troubles, jaundice, dysentery and a general loss of appetite. We could not eat our rations, or when we did our stomachs threw the food up again. Meal times came and went and we were disinclined to eat. For my

part, I did not even feel hungry. Seven days actually passed during which I had taken nothing but hot tea, and still I felt no immediate urge for food.

What the men needed was fresh meat. I tried goat-flesh; it made me retch. Ninety per cent of the eggs bought from the Nagas were bad. It was no comfort to us to know that a Naga's conception of a good egg was one that contained the advanced embryo of a chicken. There was little I could buy from the natives of Tseminyu. The Japanese had already cornered all but a few of the pigs, rice and fowl. This afterwards proved the case in every village we occupied. We were shown letters, in bad English, in which the enemy had demanded so many hundred "tins of rice and pigs or we burn the village down and shoot you". It mattered little to the unscrupulous Nippon Army that their demands often exceeded the actual amount of food the villagers possessed. What they wanted they took. If they paid for it, which was unusual, it was in a worthless paper currency, printed for the purpose and bearing the words "Japanese Government" in English. The "money" of course was useless to the starving Nagas who could not spend it.

The Chindits paid for goods and services in sound, solid, silver rupees, which the natives could use to barter with richer villages to the north.

On the Doctor's advice it was decided to kill a pack-bullock to provide fresh meat for the column. The bullock chosen had proved useless as a pack-animal. It was extremely lazy. Huge and slow-moving, it would hit up a steady one m.p.h. when provoked. The men called it *H.M.S. Thora Picche*\* which means "a little later". The "*H.M.S.*" was a tribute to its size.

The bullock was killed and we ate our fill. It was delicious. For the first time in a month we had eaten fresh meat. Poor old *Thora Picche*, you died for a good cause.

As for the sickness, it slowly passed off, and the column was physically sound again, except for a few, myself included, who were ill until we left the Hills, suffering debility.

Monsoon rain lashed down day and night. The huge Dakotas of the R.A.F. and the little 'planes of Colonel Philip Cochrane's Command never failed in their attempts to visit us

\* Pronounced *Tawra Peechy* (Hindusthani).



at Tseminyu. I erected pick-ups and arranged supply-drops and never once did the flyers consider the weather too great a hazard. When the thick clouds obscured our mountain retreat they would return again and again to find us. Their daring low flying among the treacherous, misty peaks earned the praise and admiration of the columns in the Hills.

At Tseminyu we waited orders to move south—or east. Our patrols reported no enemy on Tarago mountain. All day long, and night too, we could hear the heavy boom of guns and bombs at distant Kohima, where the defenders, now almost surrounded, were fighting for their lives.

We were sitting in the school-house, watching the rain. A soldier came in. He saluted the C.O. and said:

"Beg pardon, sir, but we're bringing in some Indians we captured down the road. We think they might be Jifs."

The Colonel got to his feet.

"Jifs?"

"Yes sir. They've got a lot of Jap propaganda on them and I.N.A. badges."

"Where are they?"

"Coming up the road now, sir."

This sounded interesting. The Jifs are the members of Subhas Chandra Bose's "Indian National Army". It is a very small organization composed chiefly of Indians, and mainly does slavey work for the Japanese who treat them with contempt. Subhas Chandra Bose raised this army with the help of the Japanese Government who recruited members simply by promising the terrors of a concentration camp to dissenters. Even that threat failed to achieve the results expected by the Japanese. Many thousands of Indians imprisoned in Japanese hands refused to serve in the labour battalions. The yellow men were not very tactful in their recruiting. They scoffed at India's religions; told the Sikhs to cut their hair and shave off their beards, and hurled derision of a similar nature at the beliefs and customs of other members of this strongly religious nation.

I have seen these insults in print, in the handbooks issued to the I.N.A. We captured many such documents.

"Indians," they read, "must throw aside their religious differences. Dissimilarity in your religions is a barrier to unity

of purpose in war. The Japanese do not tolerate disunity." This from a people who cannot make up their own minds whether to be Shinto or Buddhist.

As could be expected these insults were not ignored by the Indians, who are most enthusiastic in their beliefs. It was poor propaganda; the Japanese are no psychologists. How different from the Indian Army where Sikhs, Mohammedans, Hindus and all castes and religions are free to indulge their own particular faith. The religions of the people of India have never been quashed by the British. On the contrary, they have been fostered. Those who do not eat pork need not eat pork; the food of their creed is provided. The Sikh may keep his beard.

Another sidelight on the Japanese mind is the quaintly worded extract from a Jif manual captured at Tseminyu:

"The Japanese soldier fights for Tenno. He is therefore good soldier and I.N.A. must be good soldiers similar. Here is a true story which shows I.N.A. how a good soldier is the Japanese. A Japanese fighting messenger was given a very importantly message to deliver to a High Officer. On the way he was shot dead by an enemy sniper. That night, the Japanese High Officer have a dream in his sleep and the spirit of the dead soldier appeared to him and safely delivered the message."

That and many similar ridiculous statements in the handbooks issued by the Japanese, which were printed in English (?) and Urdu, amused the Indians rather than won them over. It is difficult to believe in a cause based on fantasy.

The Indians were brought to the school-house. They wore British khaki battle-dress, carried no weapons. They swore allegiance, yet each carried in his pockets Japanese propaganda and the orange, green and white badge of the I.N.A. The question was, were they Jifs or, as they professed, 'escaped prisoners? The propaganda they carried told against them, but the Colonel was a fair-minded man. Their interrogation lasted five hours, at the end of which they were adjudged innocent of disloyalty. They were genuine escaped prisoners of war.

The Indians' story was a strange one, but subsequent evidence bore it out. Since it was true it showed evidence of

an amazing child-like simplicity shown by the Japanese in their dealings with prisoners. Surely no other army could have displayed such utter madness as they did.

These Indians had been captured at Kohima and taken behind the lines to where a recruiting officer—one, Captain Ajmer Singh—had set up office. There they were informed that if they were willing they could become members of the I.N.A.

Their task would be to go out in foraging parties to collect food for the Japanese. They would be given badges to wear which would permit their unrestricted movements in and out of the Japanese lines. Of course they would not be armed; their yellow masters could not trust them that far.

"And if we refuse?" asked the Indians.

"Then," replied Ajmer Singh, "I cannot be responsible for the actions of the Japanese. You have seen their shortage of food. Be sure that prisoners would suffer likewise. A prison camp in Burma, if you got that far, is not a pleasant thing."

"If we consent to join your organization can you promise that the Japanese will not molest us?"

"They will not interfere. You will be free to leave your camp to bring in food."

"Then," chorussed the sepoys, "let us join. Give us our badges."

It was all too easy. They were given badges and propaganda leaflets and they simply walked out of the camp and disappeared into the Hills, where they knew the British were. The coloured lapel button was a pass-out from one camp, the familiar battle-dress a ticket of entry into the other. The information they brought us was valuable. They laughed at the simplicity with which they were granted their freedom. Again and again this happened. Over a period of months the Indians captured at Kohima were given their liberty in this fashion—often on the day they were captured—yet the Japanese never seemed to be aware of their own crass stupidity.

The Indians were fed and, after a night's sleep, were given rations and sent back to Brigade Headquarters at Mokochung. There were a few genuine Jifs in the Hills; they were the only ones to be armed and were usually in charge of food-foraging parties of pseudo-Jifs. Sometimes, when a party of loyal sepoys reached a British column, their Jif "leader" was *their* prisoner,

marching with his hands in the air and his own gun in the small of his back.

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I looked up from the map I was studying and said to the Colonel:

"Sir, I'd like to go to Chechama today. On the pony, if I may."

"What interests you at Chechama?"

"According to my map there's about a mile of the track this side of the village which appears to be on a fairly flat plateau. It might be worth looking at."

"For an air-strip, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Very well, take a pony. Sam Hoyle should be here any moment, though. He's taking an advance party to Chechama. You may as well go with him."

I said: "Right", and went off to arrange a pony with Doug Deyes, the Animal Transport Officer.

Major Hoyle and I and one platoon of 33 Column left Tseminyu at twelve o'clock. Sam and I were mounted and we rode ahead of the marching platoon. A Naga interpreter walked with the men.

At Milestone 28 we halted for the midday meal, and to await Peter Goatley's platoon who were coming from Thegwepekenyu to join us. They had been at Thegwepekenyu during our occupation of Tseminyu, guarding the approach from the south. As we waited for Peter, we lay in the shade smoking cigarettes until a commotion down the track where a sentry stood caused us to turn our heads. Three Nagas were shepherded towards us. They carried spears and something else, and appeared to be very excited.

When they stood before us we saw that they held some Japanese webbing-equipment, a few pouches of ammunition and a stout leather belt of Japanese Army issue. The Tabashi listened to their story gravely.

"Sir," he explained, "these men have killed a Japanese. They have brought these things as proof, because they think you will be pleased."

Sam said: "Where do they live? How did they kill him?"

"Sir, they are villagers of Chechama. Today, when they returned from their work in the rice with three other men, they saw this Japanese walking alone on the track. He was afraid of them when he saw them. They told him they were friends but he could not understand them. So they show him they want to give him rice and *dzu* and soon he understood and he goes with them. When they go to Chechama they all have spears and *lapoks* and they walk beside, and behind, and in front of him and he is afraid again. He has no gun."

The three villains seemed to understand. They grinned broadly and waved their spears. Sam said:

"What happened then?"

"They go into Chechama and the man thinks the Japanese soldiers are there, and he shouts their names very loudly but no one answers. So he is very frightened and he sits down, but the Chechama Gaumbara says: 'Give him food,' and when he sees the rice and the *dzu* he thinks they are friends. So he drinks the *dzu*. The Gaumbara says: 'We must keep him and give him to the Englishmen,' but the other Gaumbara says: 'No. He is a Japanese and the Japanese took two of our women. Kill him!' So they argue and one man is very angry and while they talk he walks up behind the Japanese with his *lapok* and cuts his head like this,"—he made a V-slash with his hand. I grimaced. The interpreter continued.

"When everyone sees what he has done they all jab at the Japanese with their spears. He was a bad man," he ended, abruptly.

Sam said: "I suppose we had better send this stuff on to Boy."

I said: "I'll give 'em a note to take."

I had ideas about that leather belt. It was just what I needed for my pistol and *kukri* to hang on. I wrote a note to the Colonel, explained the situation, and asked if he would keep the belt for me. Then we packed up and went to Chechama, Peter having joined us in the meantime.

I surveyed the plateau at the entrance to the village. As I half-suspected, it was useless for a landing-strip. I decided, since it was getting late, to spend the night at Chechama with Sam and Peter, and return to Tseminyu in the morning.

As we entered the Angami Naga village, the Nagas crowded at the doors of their huts to greet us. They had experienced

the terrors of Jap occupation and their relief at seeing British troops was enormous. They cheered us as we climbed the steep path to the top of the hill where the Christian village stood. Christian and pagan alike lined the terraces on which the village was built and laughed with joy as the thin green line wound its way between the scattered huts.

Poor people. They had such simple faith in our small band.

The Chief came to meet us, and the people threw their huts open to the disposal of the tired Chindits. The Chief said :

"My people are so happy. Now you are here the Japani will not dare come. The war is over now."

Such was their sincere belief in the British Army. If only two men had come to the village, the people would have thought the same. Three weeks before, two Hurricanes had strafed the enemy's grain-store in Chechama, on Major Henschman's recommendation, and the people had left their dwellings to cheer the 'planes as they swooped low to attack. That three of the Japs had been killed amused them greatly. They excitedly recounted the story, telling how they could actually *see*—and this pleased them immensely—the pilots of the two aircraft. When the Gaumbara learned that I was a flyer he was delighted, and insisted that I must know the two pilots concerned, and I must be sure to thank them. I was the first airman he had ever met and he gave me his spear as a memento. So I became the proud possessor of a six-foot lance, bladed at one end and spiked at the other. Woe to the Japs.

At night, as we sat round a Naga camp-fire, a party of Angamis came in from Dihoma, some twelve miles to the south-east. They were refugees who had escaped that closely-guarded Jap stronghold. They had an interesting story to tell.

When the enemy had left Chechama they took with them two of the women of the village. As captives, in whom the Japanese could indulge their fancy, they were taken to Dihoma. More of the enemy had arrived at the village shortly afterwards and they proceeded to make a fort of Dihoma. The refugees' estimate of the garrison strength ranged from two-fifty to five hundred men. The inhabitants of Dihoma were forbidden to leave the village under penalty of death and they were naturally scared at such a show of arms.

The men of Chechama, however, furious at the abduction of the two women, made up their minds to rescue them. A party

of twelve armed Angamis set off one night to attempt the rescue, but when they reached Dihoma they were dismayed at the strength of the enemy, and returned empty-handed. Two nights later, the women escaped alone and made their way back over the hills to Chechama, where they were joyously received.

Now it was the Jap's turn to be annoyed, and so, tying a captured Chechama Gaumbara to a stake, they threatened to torture him unless the women were returned. It was all rather petty, but typically Japanese. The Nippon he-men refused to leave Dihoma to bring back the wayward wenches. They said: "The British will not drive us back to the Chindwin. We will stay here and fight to the last man." It sounded very heroic, true to the glory of the Samurai. But not when you remembered that the British, so far from advancing victoriously, were in point of fact still fighting like demons to keep the Japanese out of Kohima. The tide showed no sign of turning.

The Angami Nagas of Chechama read of the Gaumbara's plight in a note from the Japanese. The women bravely offered to return for the sake of the wretched chieftain, but the men refused to let them. Perhaps they could see that it was not the fact that the Japs needed the women—there were many more at Dihoma to satisfy their lust for rape—but that the glorious helots of the Samurai felt that their pride was somewhat punctured and their authority overridden by ignorant savages. Or maybe they merely wanted an excuse to torture somebody.

The refugees who told the tale had escaped that night. Others, they said, would get away if only the R.A.F. would bomb Dihoma so that they might escape in the confusion. What happened to the unfortunate Gaumbara, we never knew.

As for bombing the village there seemed to be enough Japs in it to warrant it. I said:

"But it's your home. Your people are there. Aren't you afraid they will be killed in the bombing?"

"We ask you to do this at our people's request," they replied. "Our people are suffering. They want to escape and they want the Japanese to die. Send the aeroplanes and bomb the village—it will be no worse than to die at the hand of the Japanese!"

I was impressed. I said:

"Draw me a map of the village. Show me where the Japanese are concentrated. Tell me where their machine-guns are."

They drew me a map, showing plainly where the main enemy forces were concentrated. A hundred men here; fifty men there; these by the lake have machine-guns; their food and supplies are stored in these huts—it was accurately drawn, as Major Henschman, who knew the village, afterwards vouched.

I promised to try to send the 'planes and returned to the hut to sleep.

I woke at dawn and went outside. Sam Hoyle was already up. He was talking to a Naga, through the Tabashi. Sam said to me:

"When do you propose to go back to Tseminyu?"

"After breakfast. Why?"

"About a hundred Japs occupied Nerhema last night and I'd like the Colonel to know as soon as possible."

I looked at Nerhema, plainly visible across the nullah, some four miles. This might be serious. We only had two platoons at Chechama. Sam was speaking again:

"Can you get back quickly and give them the news?"

"Right, Sam, I'll go now."

"Tell Colonel Stevens that this chap"—indicating our Naga informant—"was in Nerhema last night when the Japs arrived. He says they have 4-inch mortars, so we'd like our own mortars up here, and more men, as soon as they can do it. My column will be coming up later, but they're probably nowhere near Tseminyu yet."

"I'm a lousy horseman, but I'll get there as fast as I can."

I quickly packed my field-equipment, tied it to the saddle, stuck my spear in the musket-scarabard, and waved goodbye to Sam, who watched me pick my way down the mountain-side.

Once on the track I dug in my heels and positively galloped, which was no mean thing for a rider of my poor ability. When the narrow track cornered sharply, I slowed down to navigate it, sick to death of the precipice at my side. Then off again, full pelt to the next blind corner. Then a canter; then a trot—but that hurt, so I would have to walk the horse a little way to take the ache out of my jolted limbs. This Turpin stuff, I thought, is all right for the cavalry but there's little in it for a poor airman. I was extremely unhappy.



The turns were sharper and more frequent and that drop on my left looked awfully dangerous, so that a canter was the fastest speed I dare approach. The horse would snort and rear its head. I tried whispering words of comfort in its ear. I do not know what benefit that had, but it always looked good in Western movies.

Besides the steep *khud* and rough track another thing I had to look out for was the danger of falling slap-bang into the Japanese Army. It was quite possible that a patrol of Tojo's boys might be on the track, since groups of them were wandering all over the area, and I hated the idea of flying around some sharp bend into a *sakè* binge. As I rode I kept a sharp eye on the trees obscuring the winding path ahead, and when, finally, I did see khaki uniforms filtering through the green foliage, I stopped the horse and waited, hand on gun. Were they British or Japs? I knew of no Chindits expected along the track. If they were Japs I was ready to turn the horse and do a Rommel. But it was a relief to see the familiar, mis-shapen bush-hats of the Chindits. I rode up to meet them. There were eight, a section. I said: "Hullo. Who's men are you?"

The section-leader, a corporal, grinned. He said:

"Mr. Page's, sir. We nearly let you have it; thought you were a Jap."

"And I thought you were. Where is Captain Page?"

"Just coming up with the platoon, sir. They're still round the bend."

"Are you going to Chechama?"

"Yes."

"Well, a hundred Nips moved in at Nerhema during the night, and Major Hoyle wants some mortars up there right away."

"We've got the mortars and Captain Fazackerley's platoon is with us as well, so we should be all right."

"Fine."

I rode off. Sam Hoyle still wanted his column up at Chechama so I had to get through to stop them bivouacking at Tseminyü. I urged the horse into a fast canter. Round the bend I met Bill Fazackerley leading his platoon. I stopped and told him the news. He said:

"I'll tell Alan. You'd better go to Tseminyu as quick as you can and send 33 up, *jaldi*."●

I eased the pony along the narrow path past Alan Page's platoon at such a lick I never actually saw Alan, and he told me later that I was going "like a bat out of hell with a million Japs on its tail".

A mile past the platoons I came across four men with a radio-set slung on a mule. The mule had thrown its load and they had been left behind to see to it. They thought the set was in workable order, so I got them to set it up that I might get through to the Colonel. We could not pick up the column at all, so, after a wasted half-hour, I mounted again and continued the Message to Garcia ride. I was surprised to discover that I was now almost an accomplished horseman, taking corners with the skill of a veteran.

I galloped into Tseminyu at a speed which caused even the muleteers to put down their cups of char and stare.

I reined in at the entrance of the school-house. (There was a jeep standing outside; so they had cleared the track from Mokokchung.) The Colonel, Tony Firth, and a Staff-Major came out at the clatter of hoofs. I dismounted, and, with a flourish, gravely took my six-foot spear from the saddle-scabbard. This finale to my headlong gallop to the school-house caused no little amusement.

"A present from the Gaumbara at Chechama, for the Royal Air Force," I explained. "Has John Willie arrived yet, sir?"

John Willie—Captain John Williams—was Number Two i/c 33 Column.

The Colonel said:

"They're just coming up the track now. Why?"

"Sam wants them to go straight on to Chechama."

I told him everything. He said:

"Good. I'll send them as soon as they get here."

## CHAPTER 7

### THE ROUT AT NERHEMA

The day following their occupation of Chechama, 33 Column asked for Direct Air Support to assist in the battle for Nerhema. Reynold Newcombe sent a signal to Base H.Q. requesting twelve dive-bombing Hurricanes.

The mortars of the column's Support Platoon and those of Captain Page's Support were moved down the track and set up within easy range of Nerhema, undetected by the enemy. From Chechama it was possible to see the unsuspecting Japs moving around the occupied village. The stage was set and it merely wanted the arrival of the Hurri-bombers to raise the curtain.

They came on time, a dozen of them, flying high. They circled the target at 10,000 feet, waiting for the smoke indication from the mortars. Blondie signalled the identity letter on his Aldis and gave word for the mortars to fire. The first intimation the Japs had that battle was joined was when the smoke-shells struck in their midst and the white smoke-masses billowed upward, disclosing the target to the waiting planes.

The mortars were accurate. The aircraft plunged on the village and unleashed their bombs in a screaming dive. One by one, they came in, pulling out at an incredibly low altitude, almost appearing to brush the hill-side with their wing-tips. These boys were hell-bent.

The men with the mortars cheered. They were very close to the target. One said :

" Bet that makes the lousy bastards weep."

His pal replied :

" There'll be sweet fanny of 'em left to weep if this keeps up."

But somebody was alive to weep. Jap snipers, lying in trees below the bombed camp, were proving a nuisance. Comparatively safe from the bombardment, they lay in wait for unwary heads in the British camp. As a man stepped into sight a bullet would sing across the nullah. But they had little success. The Officer in charge of 33's Support Platoon, Captain Eric Masters, stopped a nasty one, but there were no other casualties.

Bombs gone, the Hurricanes swept in for the second phase of the attack—cannon-strafting. The watching British saw the tracer and heard the four cannons of each machine rattle the tune every soldier hates. As the fighters dived the mortars varied their smoke-bombardment with a touch of H.E. that was deadly.

It was about then that Sergeant Moakes was killed. He was a brave soldier. Ignoring the diving fighters he edged his way to the blasted enemy position, the better to deal with a sniper who was firing at his platoon from the cover of a slit-trench. The bullets from the 'planes' cannons spattered the ground in front of him. Undeterred, he crept nearer. Possibly he remembered the words of the greatest Chindit of all, General Wingate, who wrote:

"The only way to take advantage of Air Support is to be as near to the target as you dare go. A soldier must not be afraid of the risk involved."

Sergeant Moakes was not afraid of the aircraft's flaming guns. He was a man utterly without fear. He was very close to the target when the 'plane came in, banking steeply. The sergeant raised his head and the sniper fired, but his aim was wild. The sergeant could see his quarry now, lying on the flame-blackened platform, his rifle at his shoulder. Then the blow fell . . . . .

The diving pilot thumbed his firing-button and sent a stream of shells into the bomb-pitted earth. The sniper died under that lethal hail. He lay on the platform, his body riddled, the hand that clutched the trigger was still. A bare hundred yards from the platform lay Sergeant Moakes. There was a hole in his head, a stray shot from the guns of the wheeling aeroplane. So died a very courageous fighter.

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76 Column arrived at Chechama the following day. The news was good. A patrol of 33 Column had entered Nerhema and reported the position clear of enemy. The bombs had wreaked terrible havoc. The blitzed area was littered with Japanese dead, left unburied in the enemy's panic-stricken flight. The stench was awful.

Another Chindit Column, a battalion of the Essex Regiment, was near Nerhema. They were at Cheswema to the west. It was Brigade's intention to move this column to Nerhema. 33 Column were to remain at Chechama. We of 76 wondered where our next move would be. We thought it would be east, where our Recce Platoon was patrolling. We knew a move to the east would involve a very difficult journey. So far we had travelled on an animal-track, difficult enough but easier than a

‘march over the country in the east. The map showed no animal-tracks, only a fifth-rate foot-path for part of the journey. After that—nothing. The hills to the east were steeper, higher. In addition the monsoon was now at its worst, making the slippery slopes more treacherous. We wondered if our mules could make it. There were morasses in the nullahs to circumnavigate, water-filled paddy to wade through, and the villages were fewer and less accessible. We wondered what Brigade’s intention would be ; a march east was almost certainly indicated, but the prospect was distasteful.

Brigadier Perowne, 23 Brigade’s tall, giant, monocled leader, visited us at Chechama. With him came Mr. District Commissioner Adams.

I was inquisitive to see this pale, young-looking Commissioner. He carried a revolver at his hip and wore the rank badges of an honorary Colonel. A soft-spoken man of indeterminate age—he looked younger than he probably was—he spoke the Angami dialect like a native. The Nagas loved him. As he got out of his jeep they crowded round him with all the devotion of children. He was very much like a father to them as he quietly spoke their difficult language, and they laughed at his jokes and brought him presents and told him of the Japani whom they hated. He had lived among them for years and knew their very soul.

The Brigadier spoke to the Colonel for a long time. When he and Adams had gone the C.O. turned and called the officers into the H.Q. hut.

He said : “ We go out tomorrow.”

“ Where to, sir?”

He smiled wryly. “ East. To Kidzematuma.”

I asked : “ What about Dihoma, sir? Do we have a crack at that?”

“ We may do, later. Anyway, your boys are going to bomb that, starting tomorrow. Our task now is to cut the road and attack convoys moving along it.”

We knew the road he meant. It came from the Chindwin and the enemy brought their supplies to Kohima along it. That road was a vital factor in the Kohima battle. Denied its use, the Japanese divisions would be in something of a quandary. We turned our faces east. Tomorrow would begin the trek we had deemed impossible.

Before we left Chechama, we heard some disturbing news. The Essex had been surprised at Cheswema the previous night by a much superior force of Japanese, and, after a fierce battle, had been forced to evacuate. They had marched through the night over the difficult Hill-country to Nerhema. Ten men of the Essex had been captured by the Japanese. (We heard later that in a counter-attack the Essex Columns had retaken Cheswema and found these men tied to trees, bayoneted. Our men were furious at this barbarous murder of prisoners-of-war. They resolved never to be taken alive by the Japanese.)

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The long file of men and animals wound down the narrow foot-path that led into the nullah. The path was steep and slippery. The weight of the pack made walking downhill seem almost more tedious than climbing; its pressure bore down on the shoulders and seemed to give added momentum to the forward motion, turning a cautious walk into a stumbling run. The pack-animals bore their burdens stoically. Sometimes one would slip on the wet mud path and fall to its knees. Then it would have to be unloaded and allowed to get to its feet before the heavy packs were replaced.

Dysentery, too, had hit the column. Men would drop out, unable to bear the griping pains in the stomach, and seek relief in the shelter of a nearby bush.

There was a morass waiting for us on the floor of the valley. We waded through it, knee deep in evil black mud, pulling at the pack-straps to relieve our aching shoulders. We found a stream where we could water the animals. The three Air Force men and myself unloaded our heavy wireless equipment and the three mules were led to drink. The halt was very welcome. The R.A.F. sergeants were tired out, sitting in silence, smoking their cigarettes.

Sergeant Mallinson said: "How far is it, now, sir?"

I said: "We've got the hill to climb yet—it's on the top. Village called Tophema."

He groaned and nursed his feet. I knew how he felt; my own were aching like the devil. Donald Britton came up. He said:

"The C.O. says its okay to drink, but we're taking full bottles and chaguls when we leave."

I said : " Right, Don," and gave my section permission to drink. I took a swig at my water-bottle. The water was chlorinated ; it tasted foul, but it was very welcome. I refilled it at the stream and also filled the canvas chagul. The water was cool. The sun blazed down without mercy ; rivers of sweat trickled down my face. I was uncomfortable and hot. Without further ado I pushed my head into the swift, ice-cold waters. That felt good.

We loaded the mules at First Whistle and prepared to scale the mountain. Second Whistle and the column moved off.

The first part of the ascent was particularly steep and it was difficult to get a foothold in the smooth clay. Men and mules stumbled and fell. The halts for breath were many and frequent ; we were very thankful for them.

We almost crawled into Tophema, the villagers coming to meet us. It was with a sigh of utter relief that I dumped my pack on the ground to search for a hut to accommodate the men. Lieutenant Harry Cole came along, a cheerful smile on his sun-tanned face.

" Hello, Harry. Don't look so damned cheerful. It's bad for my morale, the way I feel."

He said : " Tophema welcomes you, intrepid birdman. Park your boys in that basha and come and have a noggin of *dzu*."

" Shut up and give me a hand with this set." We unloaded the wireless and the mule went to graze.

I said : " How long have you been in Tophema?"

Harry grinned. " A few days," he said. " I've got the run of the village. By the way, got a fag?"

I passed him a cigarette. He lit it and took a few puffs. His eye lit on my spear. He said :

" Where on earth did you get that?"

" I'm a pal of the Gaumbara's at Chechama. He gave it to me. It's damned useful for climbing up these blessed hills."

He said : " Come and see what I've got."

We went into a hut and Harry unearthed a bright red blanket from his pack. It was beautifully adorned with many-coloured designs. Harry said :

" Do you like it?"

" I think it's grand. Where did you pick it up?"

"It's a Hunter's Blanket. I got it when I was at Lazami with the platoon. The Nagas there were absolutely wonderful to us. They'd give us anything we wanted. Tons of eggs—the Japs hadn't been there but once and there was plenty of food. Absolutely wonderful."

He was lost in admiration for the Lazami Nagas. I said:

"Any Christians?"

"Nearly the whole village. You should have seen them when we left. The entire community lined the path as we went out and bless me if the women didn't all start singing hymns. 'Nearer my God to Thee'—very touching. Really beautiful to hear. We almost broke down and wept."

"'Nearer my God to Thee'—in English?"

"Of course not. They sang it in their own tongue. Beautiful—beautiful. I was very moved, I can tell you."

He was in a rapturous mood. I moved him myself, with a well-aimed paper-backed book. It was Mowrer on China, my entire library.

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I walked into the hut taken over by Column H.Q. The Colonel was poring over a map. He looked up as I entered

"Hallo," he said. "Your people fixed up now?"

"All fixed up, sir. What's the next move?"

"Well, we want to get to Kidzematuma. Junior and Hugh Bond are on their way there now. The column will leave here after lunch tomorrow, but I hardly think we'll be at Kidz in time for our next air-drop."

"Would you like me to go on ahead early tomorrow, sir?"

"I was thinking of that. How do you feel about it?—it's a tough hike."

"I'm game."

"Right-o, then. This is the layout." He pointed to Gariphema, ten miles away. "You and Denis Simmonds can make an early start in the morning and try to reach Gariphema for lunch. The column will leave here about 13.00 hours, after your chaps have passed the supply-drop message, and will proceed to Gariphema where we will stay the night. (It'll be damned bad going with the mules. Have a look at the map.) As soon as you've had tiffin I want you to push on and make Kidzematuma before dark, if possible. . All right?"



"Right, sir. I'll get the equipment ready tonight. I'll take a 22-set and leave my set for the chaps to pass the supply-demand."

"Very well. Give Denis a *bolo* when you see him."

I went outside to make my arrangements. It was quite dark by then. I warned the army signallers to have the set ready and the Aldis lamp, Very pistol and spare signal-cartridges packed. Also a spare accumulator. One mule could carry all this. It was late when I turned in, and I was very tired.

---

Now let me introduce you to Kumbo. He plays a great part in the rest of the story and it is befitting you know what sort of a man he is. Kumbo—you could hardly call him that to his face; it was usually Kumbo Tabashi or, better still, Mr. Kumbo—is a short, strongly-built little man. He is a Naga—an Angami—from Kohima. This stout-hearted, honest little ex-schoolmaster was loved by the column for the good friend he proved himself to be.

He spoke English fairly well, knew the Hills and the Hill-people intimately. He was extremely useful in many ways. Kumbo was a genius. A guide, interpreter, spy, he was all that and a philosopher too. Mister Kumbo, let me remind you, was a Naga.

Our small band was wending its way out of the Angami village of Tophema, down through the tunnel that is the gateway to every Naga mountain retreat. Denis Simmonds and I were leading and Kumbo strode behind with the usual broad grin on his homely face.

We passed several graves at the entrance of the village. They were pagan burial-grounds, and each grave bore its complement of spears, blankets, cooking-utensils and dried maize. Some, in addition, were marked with man-size wooden idols by which the sex of the deceased could be determined. They were crudely carved and poorly painted, the paint thin where many monsoons had washed away its pristine glory. The faces of these figures, now rather smooth-worn, still showed the crude art of some former iconolater probably long-dead. The breasts of the female figures were of the Polynesian school; the rest was Epstein.

I asked Kumbo about them.

"How old are these idols?"

"Many, many years, sir."

"Twenty, thirty, forty?"

"Very old, sir."

And that was an end to it. Kumbo was evidently trying to impress me. If any time up to the end of the last century was "very old" then the idols were just that.

Mr. Kumbo belched politely and resumed his study of the good earth. I had other things to think of, too. My stomach was giving me hell, for instance.

The heavens opened and the rains came. We stopped and pulled the ground-sheets out of our packs. They made a fair substitute for a raincoat, though our legs up to the thighs got thoroughly soaked. The narrow path ran like a Scenic Railway across the breast of a hill. The mule slipped in the mud. The poor beast rolled over and over down the hill, kicking helplessly, sending the two weighty boxes flying. Now was a job before us. The animal lay on the slope four hundred feet below, its load scattered yards away. The men unslung their own harness and hurried down to it. It was unharmed although very frightened, and before long it was up on the path again, its load re-adjusted.

Half-an-hour later we met a small party. It was a band of naked Nagas carrying two stretchers fashioned of bamboo on which lay two cheerful, bearded white men. The Nagas were singing as they came along the foot-path. We stopped them. Denis said to the white men:

"Hello, are you from Kidzematuma?"

They were in extremely good spirits. One said: "Yes, sir. Mr. Bond's platoon. We 'ad a bit of a duffy last night at Kidz and 'im and me"—indicating the other man—"was shot in the legs."

"Hurt bad?"

"No, not bad. It 'urts a bit though, sir. But the Japs didn't 'alf 'op it." He lifted his injured leg. He said:

"Some bloody little sod's got to pay for this."

His pal said:

"Got a fag, sir, please?"

We supplied them from our ration packets.

"Well, sir, we'll 'ave to be going. Got a long way to go—Mokokchung—and we want to be with the column before night."

Denis said: "The column's at Tophema, but it's leaving at noon. You'd better get there quickly and stay the night."

"Right-o, sir." He looked at the waiting stretcher-bearers. "Come on, you blinkin' heathens! 'Op to it."

I was amused at his inordinate cheerfulness. He was Kipling's British Soldier to the life, Mr. Tommy Atkins a-servin' of the Widow.

The grinning Nagas picked up the stretchers and "'opped to it". The last I heard was Mr. Atkins saying:

"Come on, let's 'ave that song again, you ugly old sinners." He had a long, long journey in front of him.

We lunched at Gariphema. At least, the others lunched. I was unable to stomach any food, so I contented myself with a mess-tin of hot tea and a hard biscuit. Denis said:

"We must pay the Gaumbara our respects. Besides, he might have a drop of *dzu*."

We walked down the village compound to the Gaumbara's hut. The village was small and incredibly filthy, and differed from the hamlets to the north in many respects. The huts of the Angami are larger and more stoutly-built than Lotah or Rengma houses. They are constructed of thick, rough, wooden planks and have wide, overhanging eaves which, in the front of the house, form a dark porch. I remember thinking that they seemed more suitably built to withstand the monsoon than the clay and bamboo houses of the Lotah.

The frontage, under the porch, was lined with the skulls of long-dead water-buffalo. Everywhere in the compound I could see symbols of the ox; carvings representing the heads of cattle and rudely painted cattle pictures on the walls together with females with sharp-pointed breasts and somewhat stark representations of the male body.

Even the roof-eaves were given the appearance of horns by the addition of two huge wood gables, which were pointed at the ends and curved upwards.

We were given *dzu* by the Gaumbara. The drinking vessels were hollow horns. We did not tarry at Gariphema. We said goodbye to the Gaumbara, won his heart with a silver rupee and a cigarette, and turned our faces to Kidzematuma.

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My pencilled diary account of the journey to Kidzematuma dismisses that trek with an airy, "Left G. 13.30 hrs. Going is HELL. Felt ill."

That is the account in a nutshell. In actual fact the march was the most damnably difficult one we thought we would ever make. The first half of the journey was down-hill on the weed-grown, tree-obstructed foot-path which took us into the depths of a dank nullah. On the way down we passed a dead mule, its stomach bloated with the gases which come after death. It had belonged (said Kumbo, and I have no reason to doubt him) to a Japanese food-foraging party who had been this way before.

The nullah was gloomy but cool. Trees flung their branches over our heads, providing protection from the sun. A river, darkly brown, ran through the grove. Its current was fast, as we found out, wading through it waist deep. Several men lost their balance against the strong under-tow, and went under, to reappear with a surprised expression on their faces and a volley of unprintable epithets.

The ascent before us was terribly abrupt; something like five thousand feet to be climbed in a mile of forward movement; a one-in-one gradient. We gazed at it in awe.

Denis said: "God knows how we'll get up that, but we'll take our time about it. First of all, everybody get a bath—then you'll feel refreshed before the climb."

It needed no second invitation. We stripped and plunged into the muddy stream. It was filthy but very refreshing, and it put everybody in a better mood to attempt the climb.

We took it at a run—at first. Clutching at tree-roots, feet slipping and skidding on the muddy surface, backs aching under the weight of the packs, the small column painfully toiled up. The mule, poor devil, had a tough time. Over the worst bits the loads had to be removed from its back, and manhandled up by the sweating soldiers. Completely out of breath, we would halt in our own time, lying in the mud, panting. Then up again, a few more feet, another rest. I leaned on my spear, it was extremely useful as a walking-staff. The higher we got, the more the column thinned out as the weaker fell back. My grimy handkerchief was soaked with sweat as I mopped my face. A quarter-hour halt, packs off, feet against trees for support, a drink of water—no cigarettes; you need your wind—

packs on, climb. A man flops out, exhausted. Go on, son, you can do it! Grit your teeth and start again. Your head is reeling, your limbs are aching, aching. And the sun is hot. God! Will it never end? Will it never end? Will it never end? It goes through your mind over and over again, like the clankety-clank of a train. Up and up! Your lips are dry. Your body is tortured with the strain and the weight. Your breath hisses through clenched teeth. Will it never end? Like the clank of a train—of a train—of a train, the beat of a drum—drum—drum—drum! That's it, boy. That's the top! A few feet now—but no! It never is. There's another horizon above you now. This one, then! No. Nor that. And suddenly, the ground falls flat under the feet that mechanically climb. You aren't used to this. It *is* the top. Fall on your back, British Soldier, and to hell with everything. You've won through and you need a rest. Have a cigarette, British Soldier.

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Lieutenants Hugh Bond and "Junior" Harris greeted us as we straggled into Kidzematuma. Junior had a Jap Warrant Officer's sword. They gave me a drink of hot tea, and I was grateful. I pointed at the sword:

"Where did you get that, Junior?"

Junior said:

"We had another duffy last night. Gang of Japs walked in without knocking, so we scattered 'em. This was left behind."

He pointed over his shoulder at the charred shell of a hut.

"See that?" he said. "It was set on fire during the scrap. Baxter lost all his kit in it."

Baxter was a thin, pale youth of rather nervous disposition. He was a likeable kid and rather popular with the rest of the men, but the strain of the nomadic existence we were leading was beginning to tell on him. He was moody at times and I would endeavour to cheer him up. Poor Baxter, he had a tough time during the final phase of the trek.

Junior and Hugh were as cheerful as ever. Hugh would boast of his Recce Platoon, whose job it was to reconnoitre the ground over which the column was to travel. He was very proud of the platoon and sometimes his pride took a fantastic trend.

"Recce," he would say, "never get lost. We can travel through jungle without map or compass."

Lt. Harris would guffaw: "Haw, haw! Recce never get lost! What about the time . . . . .?" And he would proceed to pull the lanky Mr. Bond down to earth with a wallop. But Lt. Harris would exaggerate, too. You see, Lt. Harris was also proud of his platoon. The toughest, fightingest, don't-give-a-damnedest bunch of roughnecks in the British Army, he would assert—and he meant it. Junior was a tough little man; not a drawing-room soldier, but five-foot-six-and-a-half of solid poundage and hard muscle.

I pottered around the village to look for a supply-drop site. Kidzematuma was the usual collection of filthy huts and the sign of the ox symbol was everywhere. The Angamis in their bone armbands and black, thinly-stripped bamboo leg garters were no different from others of their tribe. They differed from the Lotah and Rengma in their dress, which was a short black skirt adorned with rows of white beads—a little more modest than the tiny scrap of beaded cloth with which the other tribes sought to conceal their gender.

There was no Inspection Bungalow at Kidzematuma, nor had there been at Tophema and Gariphema. These villages were remote from the beaten tracks. Kidzematuma had no Christian community; the people were pagan. The ox was their tribal god. These broad-shouldered stocky people looked fierce with their slant-eyes and strong features. Yet they were peaceable enough. They hoed the paddy and milked the goats and when you asked them about the outside world they pointed to the west and spoke of Kohima, many miles distant, and that was all they knew. Their manners were childishly simple. When nature called—why, they just answered the summons right there in front of you and thought nothing of it. The women, too. It could have been disgusting, if it had not been so downright natural.

## CHAPTER 8

### *OF LICE AND MEN*

The arrival of the Dakotas timed perfectly with a break in the heavy grey pall which swirled up the hill-slopes and cloaked the mountain village. It had rained steadily all morning, and the visibility had been down to nil, so that I had every reason to believe that the aircraft would fail in their mission. But

the gods were kind. The cloud thinned and uncovered the peak a bare quarter-hour before the first 'plane arrived, guided over the all-concealing cloud-blanket by a skilful navigator.

Six of them, one by one, droned to the orbiting-point and awaited the recognition signal.

I picked up the Aldis and flashed "A-Able", the letter of the day. Major Simmonds strode up. He pointed to a peak beneath the circling aircraft.

"There are a few Nips on that hill. Better warn 'em, I think."

"Right." I picked up the hand-microphone.

"Hello, Able Baker Jig. This is Victor X-ray Oboe. How do you hear me?"

Back came the answer from the leading Dakota.

"Able Baker Jig to Victor X-ray Oboe. Receiving you loud and clear."

"Hello, Able Baker Jig. Loud and clear also. Look out for some little yellow baskets on the hill in continuation of the long arm of my flare-path. Is that understood?"

"Roger—listening out."

They swung in low, avoiding the hill, and the first bundles parachuted to earth. I sat on the ground and watched, microphone in hand, ready to correct any bad dropping. One 'plane came in too high and the 'chutes drifted on the breeze into the deep nullah.

"Victor X-ray Oboe to aircraft just dropping. Your parachutes are drifting. Come in low, please."

"Aircraft to ground—Roger."

It required very low flying and accurate judgment to drop the white canopies on that narrow ridge, but now the flyers were surpassing themselves. I glanced at the darkening sky and hoped the drop could be completed before the bad weather closed in again. The men were gathering in the bundles, storing them in a hut with the help of a willing band of Nagas. It was done quickly, quietly and smoothly. Hugh Bond despatched a party of Nagas to retrieve the bundles in the nullah. A few spots of rain landed on my face and I saw the edge of the thick cumulus float overhead.

There was only one aircraft to finish now, probably needing two runs to complete the drop. It was a race between aircraft and weather.

The pilot saw the situation and came in fast, banking steeply to port. The 'chutes ripped open on the static lines and floated down gently—all except one. I gave a yell:

"Look out below!"

The men scattered as the basket plunged earthwards, its torn parachute fluttering uselessly. It struck with a crash near the wireless set and I walked over and gazed at a thick yellow mess which oozed from the battered tins in the basket. Others joined me; there were almost tears in their eyes.

"Peaches," someone muttered thickly, "the whole bloody fruit-ration."

We were reading the welcome letters from home when the first men of the column straggled in. Poor devils, they were exhausted by the arduous climb. They flopped to the ground, out to the wide.

The Bish struggled out of his pack-harness and sighed:

"Phew! What a climb that was. I thought it would never finish."

I gave him a cigarette and said:

"Where's the rest of the column? Still down the hill?"

The Padre nodded.

"They're coming up in their own time—in twos and threes. Poor boys, they are having a deuce of a time with the animals."

"It's no fun. Did many men drop out?"

"Quite a number. The Doctor's down there with them."

And so they came up, a few at a time, all day long. I was extremely glad to see the three Air Force sergeants. They were nearly too weak to unload the radio equipment from their trembling sweat-lathered mules. I gave them a hand with the loads and escorted them to the basha in which they would sleep. I handed them their mail and their troubles were soon forgotten as they pored through the pile of letters. My own mail was heavy. There were seven from my wife and four from my people. The mail-bag was always the most popular bundle in a supply-drop.

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There are probably more fleas in an Angami hut than any other tribal dwelling in the Naga Hills.

At night I lay fully-clothed on the dirt floor of the hut which I shared with a Naga family. It was a dingy dark hut and



had no windows. The only entrance was a doorless hole through which I could see the night sky. The remains of a fire smouldered in the centre of the room, filling the air with smoke.

The atmosphere was foul ; the smoke made me cough and I longed to be outside in the cool breeze, but the driving monsoon rain forbade. I was restless and could not sleep. An army of fleas were feasting on my body and I scratched the itching bites, feeling that I must inevitably go insane if the torture lasted much longer.

A baby bawled lustily in the hut where the family lay somewhere in the mysterious darkness of the opposite corner. I heard the whispered admonitions of the Naga mother and the querulous voice of the sleepy father, but the baby continued to wail until the sound of suckling told of its satisfaction and brought it to silence.

I cursed the fleas and groped in my shirt for a cigarette, all hope of sleep banished from my mind. There was no cigarette. I swore feebly and felt around for my boots which I put on unlaced, and went to the entrance where I stood and filled my lungs with the rain-cooled mountain air. The village was quiet. It was smothered in a blackness of Stygian density which hid the outlines of the huts and covered the stars so that nothing relieved the monotony of sombrous gloom. Nothing moved in the compound. No one walked abroad though I knew that somewhere in the darkness alert sentries were watchful and awake, sheltering as best they could from the pouring rain.

For more than an hour I stood in the doorway and watched the rain until the storm eased and the downpour became a sprinkle and then stopped. I strode outside and looked up. Stars were beginning to peep through where the cloud thinned and drifted away on the wind. My watch showed three o'clock. I returned to the hut and gathered up my blanket and ground-sheet. The family was asleep now ; the babe had ceased its hungry suckling. The only sound was a heavy snore.

I placed the ground-sheet on the wet earth some yards from the hut and lay down with the blanket over me. My pack served as a pillow. I hoped the rain would keep off ; the sky showed good promise now. The darkness had softened and seemed less harsh. There were tones in the blue which replaced the

black, and the stars were sequins in a smooth purple gown. I drifted into sleep . . . . .

I was awake in an instant when the shot rang out. I reached under the pack for my pistol and rose to my feet, thumbing the hammer. It was breaking dawn and the sky was streaked blood-red. Men were pouring out of the huts and posting themselves in positions of defence, rifles and Bren-guns at the ready. No one spoke except for a whispered command. We waited more than twenty minutes in this manner before the order "Stand down" was given.

I walked over to the little knot of officers and asked :

"What was it?"

Firth laughed.

"The first detachment of Naga Scouts arriving. One of them fired his rifle by accident."

There were about forty Nagas in the silent party that came up the hill. They wore no uniform other than the customary Angami skirt round the loins, but each man carried a modern rifle and a bandolier of rounds. The District Commissioner's Scouts were hand-picked, the finest specimens of Naga manhood. They had been well trained in the use of the rifle, which was now their most cherished possession. In the adoring eyes of the village women these Scouts were heroes, and they knew it. They could not resist a self-conscious grin at the watching female assembly as they swaggered into the village in the wake of their broad-shouldered leader, Kumalo. And so the Naga Levies had come to Kidzematuma.

My batman appeared. "Do you want breakfast, sir?"

I said: "No, just some tea and a biscuit."

He went off to boil tea. Donald Britton walked over, a light American carbine in his hand.

He said: "This is yours."

I thanked him and took the carbine and heavy magazines of ammunition. A large supply had been dropped from the Dakotas yesterday. I looked it over. She was a little beauty, trim, sleek and accurate as a rifle. Now I was really armed. I said to Don:

"Do you know what armament I carry now?"

"I know you look like a Christmas tree. What have you got?"

"A carbine, revolver, two grenades, spear, *kukri*, jack-knife and a Very pistol."

"God save Tojo," he murmured piously, and we both laughed.

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The days at Kidz were not very pleasant. There were heavy intermittent showers day and night and we were constantly subjected to attacks from fleas and flies. Whenever the weather permitted I slept, or tried to sleep, in the open, but I was usually driven inside by sudden squalls. Every morning we would pick the fleas from our shirts and lay the garments in the sun or, in the event of rain, smoke them over the fires in the huts. Light 'planes brought us silver rupees and snatched messages and the D.C.3's supplied our every need, until one morning we had orders to move again. This time it was south-east to Khesomi. We packed our bags, loaded the mules and set off along the narrow, winding foot-path.

Again we descended into the depths of a ravine and had to climb out over slippery mountain slopes. There was no rain during the journey and the heavens were bare of cloud-cover from the blazing sun. I was much weaker now and very glad of every chance to rest. We sweated in the heat and cursed the steepness of the hill though the climb was less arduous than the previous ascent to Kidzematuma. I felt giddy at times and longed for a drink from my water-bottle, contenting myself with passing my tongue over parched-dry lips. Occasionally a mule slipped and its load had to be removed and readjusted; sometimes a man fell out and the Doctor would remove his equipment and allow him to drink. There were victims to heat-stroke, too weak to drink. Water was forced through their cracked lips and they lay with their shirts removed and a wet towel applied to their foreheads.

The march was too difficult to accomplish in a day and nightfall found us in a ravine some four miles from Khesomi. We decided to stay the night there because it was hopeless to climb out in the dark. Camp was struck by the simple method of tying the beasts to trees and lying on the ground beside our weapons and mule-loads. Since it was dark and we were in the open, fires could not be lit. Everybody was too tired to

brew tea, anyway, so we were content with chlorinated lemonade made from river-water and lemon-powder from our ration packets.

Naga Scouts supplemented the bivouac guards.

There was little sleep for any of us, however, despite our exhaustion. Mules and bullocks broke their moorings throughout the night and wandered over our recumbent bodies in search of fresh pasture so that we were continually jumping up and securing them. The rain broke upon us twice and we cowered under our ground-sheets and listened to the heavy tattoo as it poured on the canvas. Dribbles of water streamed down the slope under our blankets and soaked our bodies.

What did we think of during discomfort like this? We often discussed our thoughts. The one thing uppermost in our minds was the month's leave we would enjoy when the column's work was finished and we had left the Hills. There was always a rosy vision in my mind's eye of hot, luxurious baths, new clothes, good meals and spotless napery and the comfort of a decent hotel. Swing doors and commissionaires, cinema-lights on a rainy night, the tantalizing smell of crisp bacon, the fresh feel of clean linen; all these little things tumbled through my mind. Definitely a comfort-lover, as you see.

The dawn was grey and there was a thin drizzle when we rose, red-eyed, at Stand To. The rain had swollen the river which was brown with mud. We bathed in it, filled our water-bottles and chaguls and prepared for the ascent to Khesomi. The Naga Scouts accepted the prospect cheerfully. They were accustomed to the Hills where all progress is made on foot, and their muscular legs made short work of the steepest climb. They reached Khesomi long before the column painfully wound its way along the track within sight of the tunnelled entrance to the village.

Hugh Bond, Recce Platoon commander, met us on the path. His platoon had reconnoitred the area the previous day. He showed us to the crazy lean-to, a mile short of the village, which was to be our headquarters. The shed stood on the end of a long narrow ridge; the village occupied the other end. Here we were sheltered from prying eyes by trees and our occupation of this end of the ridge instead of the village was apparent when we learned that Khesomi was visible from a strong Japanese position two miles away at Milestone 28, on

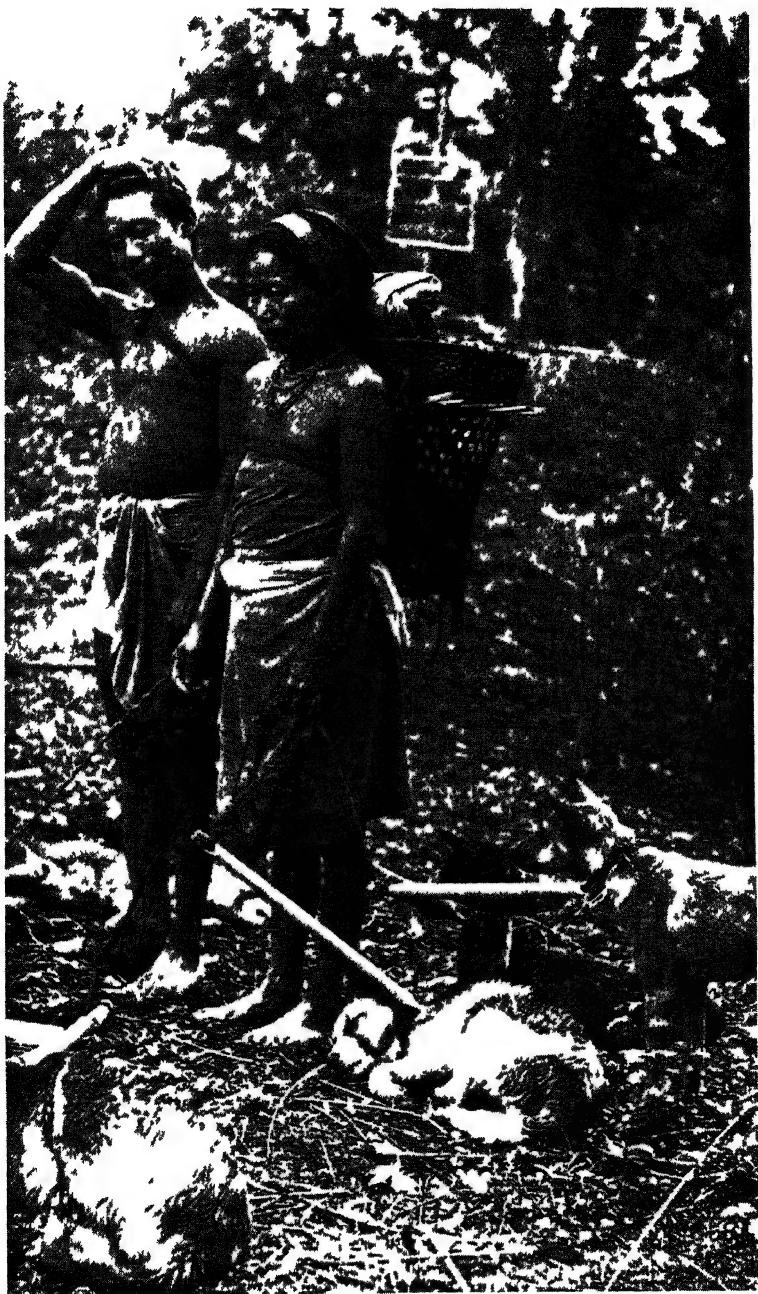
the cart-track that struggled through the hills to Mokokchung about a hundred miles distant in the north-east. The Mokokchung track was in constant use by the enemy and the villages along it were occupied by their troops. A foot-path from Khesomi crossed the cart-track and continued to Runguzumi, a distance of three-and-a-half miles. With the enemy position at M.S. 28, two miles on the left flank, and enemy-occupied Runguzumi three-and-a-half miles ahead, it will be seen that Khesomi was a very precarious position. Nevertheless it had to be occupied, so two platoons were quartered in the village and the remainder were thinly placed along the entire ridge.

The enemy had to be cleared from M.S. 28, which we referred to as "The Snakepit". Until this was done we were unable to cross the track and enter Runguzumi, our first stop on the trail to our ultimate objective, the convoy road from Burma to Kohima. Fortunately another Chindit column was already actively engaged with the enemy at the Snakepit. This was 55 Column who were using D.A.S. (Direct Air Support) to drive the Japs out. 55 Column had occupied Chozumi, only a half-mile from the Snakepit, and they had been extremely successful in making the enemy believe that Chozumi village was more strongly held than was actually the case.

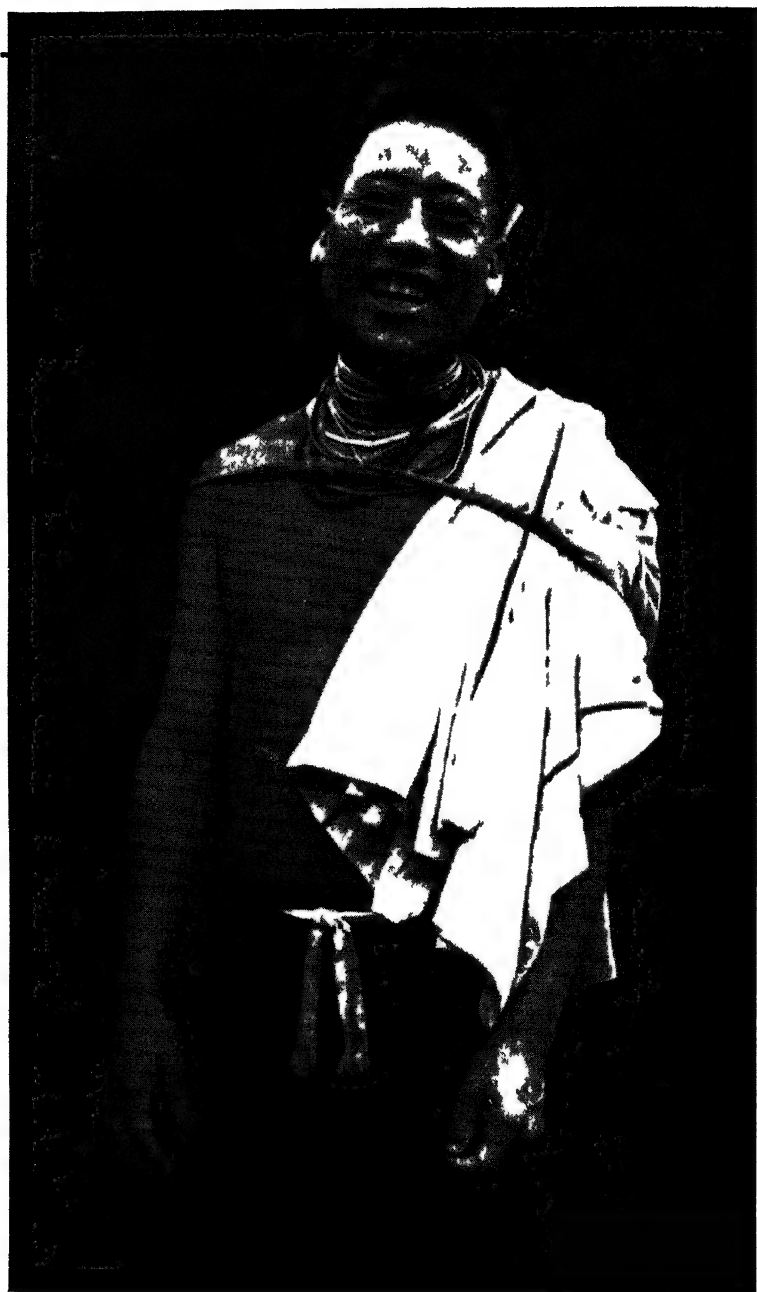
The enemy were tenaciously clinging to M.S. 28, however. For four days now, twice a day, their strong-point had been bombed and strafed by Hurri-bombers of the Royal Indian Air Force.

55 Column had been unable to take the position by physical assault since the Snakepit was geographically and strategically well placed.

At 9 a.m., dead on the hour, on the day following our occupation of the ridge at Khesomi, we had the satisfaction of seeing the dive-bombing and strafing of the Snakepit. The ridge gave us a splendid grand-stand view of the enemy position and we concealed ourselves behind trees to watch the havoc wrought by the twelve diving Hurricanes. It pleased the Chindits to see the falling bombs and the great masses of brown smoke and blasted earth that followed the detonation of each stick of explosives. Most of them knew what it was like to be dive-bombed. They had experienced the horror in the Western Desert with the 8th Army. It was good to see the



An Angami couple.



Kumalo, the Naga Scout Leader.

Jap getting a taste of High Explosive from the wing-racks of a fighter-bomber, and the crump of each explosion brought a cry of "Take that, you lousy little bastards!"

The fighter-attacks on M.S. 28 came to be a matter of routine. Twice a day we would assemble on the ridge to watch the bombing of the mortared position and usually the weather held out so that we were seldom disappointed.

Our supply-dropping, too, was most successful. I used the ridge as a dropping-site. The light 'planes visited us often, sometimes to drop messages, sometimes to snatch. I was now in communication with the L.5's having a small "Walkie-Talkie" portable radio modified to the frequency on which the 'planes operated. This set had a limited, though quite adequate, range, during which reception and transmission were of reasonable strength. It weighed about 6 lbs. overall, and was carried on the shoulder by a strap, adding extra weight to my already laden shoulders but well worth the trouble.

I dismissed my batman at Khesomi and engaged Ford, who afterwards proved to be indispensable. Ford was young, about twenty-two. This was his first campaign and though he was inexperienced in jungle warfare he turned out to be a valuable asset to me—and a good soldier.

It was Ford who nursed me through illness and pain later in the campaign, and acted as my bodyguard during the lonely trek out of the Hills to Kohima and a hospital bed.

The first thing with which Ford concerned himself, when he became my servant, was my stomach. The fact that I was unable to eat disturbed him and by dexterous sleight-of-hand he procured some valuable rice and made a pudding. It was wonderfully good to eat but I could only stomach a little. From that day on, however, almost every meal I ate was rice pudding, at my own request.

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One day a band of Naga Scouts brought a strange Angami Gaumbara to our bivouac at Khesomi. His name was Semini. I have never before seen such a collection of muscle. Semini was not tall—he stood about five-feet-seven—but he made up for his stature in sheer brawn. His shoulders were the shoulders of a Sandow; his forearms had the thickness of an average man's



leg. He was pot-bellied but somehow it looked in keeping with the rest of his massive frame. It was his calf-muscles that held one's attention. Steel-hard with a life of mountain-climbing, these dark brown rippling tissues had the monstrousness of a Congo gorilla.

Semini's garb was the short beaded skirt of the Angami people and the scarlet blanket of a headman. Pinned to the blanket was a small brass badge which, to our amazement, bore the letters "A.R.P." This left us dumb-founded and we asked Semini, through Kumbo Tabashi, how such a badge came into his possession. His face lit up with pride as he explained that he was an Air Raid Warden, and to further the mystery he produced a whistle which he blew to prove his point. Now Phezachedama, the village over which he reigned supreme, is a tiny, isolated collection of rough dwellings in the heart of the Naga Hills, and that such a place boasted the services of an Air Raid Warden was beyond belief. It may be that the bronze Colossus "acquired" the symbols of authority during some previous visit to Kohima, but there the mystery lies.

But Semini's present mission was more sober than mere clowning with a whistle. His village had been occupied by the enemy who had almost denuded it of food before leaving. Since their departure the Japanese had sent a note to Semini demanding 200 "tins" of rice and 40 pigs, which comprised nearly the entire food supply of the village. The note contained the usual threat of burning down the village if the stores were not forthcoming, so the reluctant Nagas of Phezachedama could do nothing but comply. The food was sent. Semini had realized that in spite of this there would be further demands on the village and, knowing that somewhere in the Hills were British Forces, he left his hut and set off alone to find them and seek assistance.

But the columns were much farther north than Semini calculated and it was three weeks before he came across 76 Column who had reached Khesomi.

Could we help him? he asked. Would we go to Phezachedama? That was a problem without an answer—yet. It was almost certain that the column would take Semini's village in its stride south, but we were bottle-necked at Khesomi until it was possible to by-pass the Snakepit.

Eventually a message arrived from Brigade to the effect that 55 Column would evacuate Chozumi and strike south-east, whilst the mortars of 76 Column were to occupy Chozumi and continue 55's D.A.S. A fighting-force, known as the "Hard Element", were intended to cross the Mokokchung track and move south to the convoy road, where they would employ guerrilla tactics on enemy motorized supply-columns. From the Khesomi ridge we could see the lights of the Jap transports at night, winding high in the hills in the distance.

Early next morning Hugh Bond led his platoon out of Khesomi in a bid to cross the track and enter Runguzumi, which our spies had reported clear. The file of men silently approached the track through a narrow defile and unsuspectingly walked into an ambush. Without warning a machine-gun opened up at them from the hill on the left of the cutting, whilst on the right a volley of rifle-shots rang out. In ordinary circumstances it would probably have been certain annihilation but the bad light of the early dawn and the wild shooting of the Japanese, coupled with the speed with which the platoon dispersed, resulted in complete failure for the attackers. The only casualty, oddly enough, was a Naga guide who broke his leg when he jumped down the steep *khud*. One man had a bullet in his pack which had passed close to his face. No equipment was lost. But the track still had to be crossed. Hugh's Recce Platoon tried again the next morning, this time by a wild break-neck trek beneath the enemy's noses at M.S. 28. Hugh was successful and reached Chozumi, breakfasted, and crossed the track to Runguzumi without casualty.

An advance force of 33 Column by this time had arrived at Khesomi and since 55 Column were ready to leave the operations of the Snakepit to us, our Hard Element plus Captain Page's Support Platoon moved to Chozumi by the same arduous route as that undertaken by Hugh. This journey meant a descent into the valley over ground apparently untrodden by the Nagas, and a back-breaking climb out again. We were now at a stage of the campaign when owing to the extremely hazardous nature of the country it would be folly—and well-nigh impossible—to take our animals with us. Therefore an army of Naga porters were hired to carry the mortars and radio-equipment to Chozumi, and the mules were left behind with the "Soft Elements"—

an ambiguous name—who would stay with 33 Column at Khesomi.

It rained heavily during the entire gruelling march through the jungle valley. Many men fell out with exhaustion before we reached our destination. Semini, who walked ahead with the Naga Scouts and porters, was happy that we were going to his village in the south, but even that magnificent gorilla was doubtful if we could make it.

## CHAPTER 9

### *PONCE FORT*

The Hard Element was composed of Lt.-Col. Stevens, Major Firth, the Medical Officer, Captain Wright, and myself as the personnel of Advance Column Headquarters, and the platoons of Captain Fazackerley, Lieutenant Goatley and Lieutenant Harris under Major Simmonds, the Company Commander. Lieutenant Bond's platoon were already reconnoitring the area over which we would travel. From Chozumi, Junior Harris's platoon was sent after the Recce outfit at Runguzumi to link up with them and harass the enemy on the road to Kohima.

I had the satisfaction of seeing the Hurri-bombers arrive before we left Chozumi. I stood beside the mortars and watched the bombs strike the Snakepit a bare half mile away. Then we left Capt. Page to continue the mortaring whilst we set off in the pouring rain for Runguzumi.

We had to move swiftly and quietly across the Mokokchung track near the enemy position at M.S. 28, but once over we were screened most of the way by the thick belts of trees that grew near the top of the hill, and as we moved down the hill into the nullah the slopes covered us from prying eyes.

The valley was hot and steaming. The river was swollen with the downpour and had oozed over its banks and flooded the paddy-fields. We stepped warily on the mud slopes until we reached the paddy-fields where commenced the long wade through the black, smelling water. It wasn't easy to keep balance. A quelching boot would skid on the clay and down would go some unfortunate soldier into the slime. Almost every one went down at one period or another. To add to the discomfort the rain was doing its worst and the drenched clothes clung to our bodies. A waterfall had to be crossed ; foot and nailed boot

clung to the rock as we edged our way, inch by inch, through the stinging spray and blinding floodwater. The man in front of me slipped on the rock-face and disappeared in the swirling waters below. Two of us fished him out and helped him along the smooth-worn rocks. A halt was called and we lay full-length in the filth with our heads pillowed on the wet packs, too breathless and soaked to the skin to smoke a cigarette.

I looked around the valley. On every side, where we lay, there was a wild jumble of black water and green sprawling vegetation. It seemed as though nature had gone mad in that out-of-this-world basin where tree and rock and water were thrown together in crazy confusion. The floor was oozing slime but above that, on the walls of the bowl, was greenness of a beauty that was breath-taking. It seemed to me that in our sea of mud we were the slow squirming creatures that lived and had their being in the mess of mysterious darkness that might have been in the beginning of Time. Primitive protozoa in a glutinous mire of afterbirth.

And so, we floundered through the vile stuff until we reached the footslopes of the hills beneath Runguzumi, where we began the upward toil which seemed to last ages. We were now so wet and miserable that even when we halted for a rest we could not be bothered to take off our back-pack since the weight when it was replaced clamped the cold shirts on to our sweat-heated bodies and gave us chills. We simply sank to the ground and lay on our loads amid the streaming rivulets of rainwater. Higher up the mountain we were in cloud and we marched—or rather, limped—through the soupy mass until we reached the summit where we found a track which led to the village. The prospect of hot tea and a fire to dry our clothes cheered us up a great deal. We ignored the rivers of rain which ran down our bodies, and quickened our pace along the now level path.

Runguzumi welcomed us into an atmosphere of warmth and reeking wood-fires. The Angamis helped us off with our equipment and as we stripped off our clothes under the broad eaves of a large hut, they piled dry timber on to the blazing fire. The heat from the fire was terrific and we sat around on logs of wood whilst our clothing hung above the blaze to dry. Outside the rain pelted down but near the fire it was very cosy and extremely comfortable, and our batmen soon had the billycans of tea on the boil. I had not eaten all that day, but

when Ford brought in a mess-tin of hot rice I attacked it hungrily.

The Nagas crowded in the shelter of the eaves to watch us. They were an intensely inquisitive people and would stand for hours looking at us, whispering among themselves. At first I felt very self-conscious about divesting myself of my wet clothing in front of the crowd which included two or three females. But since I could bear the sticky garments no longer, and the women were extremely reluctant to depart, I had to swallow my pride and take off my trousers. My underpants came off under the friendly shelter of a towel and, clad in the towel, I sat down. The ladies, I noticed, did not share my embarrassment.

Evening came on and we stood in our underpants and towels. Then, later, round the fire we sat and smoked and swapped yarns while outside the storm freshened and went on throughout the night, unabated. I was very sick during the night and the pains in my stomach were very much worse, so that I had little sleep. The fleas, of course, were most unfriendly. I smoked countless cigarettes.

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The monsoon rain was still pouring when we left Runguzumi the next morning, bound for Kuluzu Bagwema. There are two Kuluzus. Bagwema is the Old Village and Kuluzu Basami means New Kuluzu. This district at the time was almost lousy with Jap patrols and we had to take care not to run into an ambush.

The track was fairly easy going since it was almost level and had no steep hills to climb. It ribboned round the bosom of a long ridge and when the cloud lifted we could see, faint and smudged in the distance, the outline of Kohima. Mostly the path was cloaked in cloud and the valley below was hidden from our eyes. We marched and got wet. We halted now and then for a rest, and lying on the mud path we puffed at damp cigarettes. Baxter, the Intelligence Clerk, was looking very ill, as were quite a few of us.

The man next to me was struggling furiously to light a match for his cigarette. Match after match refused to burn and, with meticulous care, he thrust each one into the mud so that no trace was left. He was swearing, though. I unearthed my

matches from a water-tight tin and proffered them. He said: "Thanks." The cigarette glowed. He handed back the matches and held his cigarette under his hat to keep it dry. He heaved a long sigh and glowered at the streaming rain. I said:

"Fed up?"

"Not 'arf. Wonder 'ow long this is goin' to last."

"The rain?"

"No, sir—bloody trip. D'yer think we'll be in long now?"

I puffed at the weed under my hat, and looked at him. He was thin in the face. Yes, we were all getting a bit thin.

I said: "Can't say about that. Have you had any letters from home, yet?"

He grinned and his face lit up.

"Yes, I got a batch on the last drop. Me missus is goin' to 'ave another kid. Blimey, wish I was there. You ought to see the other little beggar. Wait, I'll show yer."

He struggled with an ammunition pouch and brought out a tattered wet postcard. I took it and looked at the chubby infant lying in the nude. The proud father chuckled.

"Funny little blighter. Y'oughta see 'im chase our chickens. Proper terror."

A gust of wind blew the rain under his hat and his cigarette sizzled. He looked at it in disgust and his face became deadly serious. He said:

"If it wasn't for those little sods in Japan we wouldn't be sitting in this damned rain right now. No, we'd be back at 'ome with the missus."

He obviously had no thought in his head for the war with Germany. I asked him his opinion of it.

"Well, sir," he said, "between you an' me, old 'Itler's got 'is 'ands tied right now"—this was before the invasion of the Continent—" and it won't be long before Germany packs in. But—," he raised a finger, "but, these Japs are the ones that we've really got to settle. Folks back in England don't realize what a 'ell of a life we lead on this bloody jungle business. The Forgotten War, I call it. There's Sweet Fanny Adams about it in the papers back 'ome."

He was dead right. To the newspapers in England it *was* the Forgotten War, and the people at home, naturally concerned with the strife at their doorstep, were inclined to forget the

men who fought in the hot jungle of the East, suffering disease and great hardship.

The soldier shook his head and groped for another cigarette, but the note of First Whistle forestalled him. He rose to his feet and pulled on his pack. He was grinning. He said :

"Bet you wish you was still in the Air Force, sir. 'Ow long you bin out 'ere?"

"Nearly six months."

"Blimey, only six months?"

A thought struck me. I asked : "How long have you been overseas?"

"Nearly three blinkin' years."

We swung into line and moved down the track, and something was running through my mind as we walked along. Something about a baby . . . . . ! What a superb old liar—I hoped.

Mr. Kumbo carried an umbrella. His beaming black face peered out beneath the torn canopy as the driving, swirling rain beat a tattoo on it and dribbled off on to his drenched shorts. He was a tireless little man and on his strong shoulders he carried the pack of an exhausted soldier. He hadn't been asked to carry the pack. He had seen the man stagger and fall ; had simply walked up and, without a word, had transferred the weighty equipment to his own shoulders.

As we entered Kuluzu Basami, the first of the Kuluzus, an old man stepped out of the watching throng and stopped the column. Mr. Kumbo spoke to him and translated his reply to the Colonel.

"This man says that Jap soldiers have been to the village and taken rice."

The Colonel sighed. He was very tired and very wet. He said :

"How long ago?"

"This morning, sir."

"Ask him where they have gone and how many were there?"

Kumbo spoke sharply to the old man. As the Naga replied I took stock of the ingenious hat and cloak he wore as protection from the rain. The hat was a kind of mortar-board, long and oval on the top, made of interlaced bamboo strips. The cloak was also of bamboo, hundreds of thin shavings of that useful wood which formed a covering that looked like a cheap, straggly

fur coat. In this get-up the man looked strangely like a beetle. Kumbo translated:

"There were twenty soldiers and they went down the track to Kuluzu Bagwema. He says they are coming back today—they tell him that."

The Colonel swore softly and called to Kumalo, the leader of the Naga Scouts. He said to Kumbo:

"Tell Kumalo to send two men along the track to Bagwema and warn us if the village is occupied. They had better leave their rifles behind."

Kumalo rapped out the order and two willing Scouts handed their rifles and ammunition to the leader and set off at a jog-trot. They were indistinguishable in their native dress from any ordinary villager. It was unlikely they would come to harm.

The people of Basami watched us leave from the shelter of their doorways. My spear caused much amusement as I passed each hut. I found it extremely useful as a walking staff but I admit it must have seemed unusual to the naked Nagas that a man so well armed as I was would find need of a simple native spear. I leaned on the haft as I walked. My stomach was giving me hell.

Kuluzu Bagwema lay two miles down the track from Basami. The two spies met us before we entered the village. They reported no enemy there, but as we moved in a native runner from Basami overtook us and said that twenty Japs had shadowed us from Runguzumi, and had set up machine-guns in Basami, covering the track at each entrance to the village.

Bill Fazackerley's Commando Platoon were sent to investigate, but the Japs saw them coming and withdrew.

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We stayed overnight at Kuluzu Bagwema. I tried to sleep in the stuffy corner of a hut, but as usual the fleas, combined with pain of the sores now appearing all over my body, were successful in keeping me awake. I was extremely glad when dawn broke and the village came to life. Fazackerley's Commandos ate an early breakfast and, with Semini at their head, set off for Phezachedama. I busied myself with Captain Wright in the composition of a signal to Base requesting a supply-drop at Phezachedama, to take place in two days' time.



The signal was passed and the men were warned to be ready to move out after lunch. Ford came along with the usual sweet rice pudding. He said :

"You'd better try to eat some, sir. You hardly ate a thing yesterday."

I said : "Well, I don't feel very hungry but it does look good."

"Last of the rice."

"You sound like Nat Gubbins. 'Aunt Emily came to lunch today (last of the rice)'."

He laughed.

"How do you feel, sir? Any better?"

I dug a bamboo spoon into the hot rice.

"Never felt better. A little sick, perhaps, and jungle sores and boils all over my backside, but apart from that and a little dysentery I'm all right. Mind you, it hurts a bit to sit down." I had all the enthusiasm of a hypochondriac.

A new voice broke in with : "Try lying on your stomach, then."

It was Donald Gunn, the Medical Officer. I said :

"Hello, Don. How's Harley Street?"

I noticed his face was chalk-white, and I added :

"You don't look so good yourself."

He ignored that and replied :

"I came over to see how you were. Here, take this."

He proffered a small white tablet. I asked :

"What is it?"

"Benzedrine. It will keep you going."

I swallowed it with a mess-tin of tea. Gunn said : "First Whistle's in fifteen minutes—be seeing you," and walked off. I began to lace my boots. Ford said :

"Hey! You haven't finished your rice, sir."

I groaned.

"Oh, throw it away, Ford. I'm sorry. It is very nice, but I just don't feel much like eating."

First Whistle blew and Ford helped me on with my pack. I joined the Colonel at the head of the line and we moved out just as the rain started again. There is little to tell of the march. We walked along with our coolies in the lead, through the village of Therepesemi and out along the tunnelled entrance. The coolies working in the paddy-fields looked up as we passed.

They wore the basket-work mortar-boards and beetle-backed capes similar to those worn by the old man at Basami. Men and women worked together in the mud of the paddy, stooping to tend the green shoots. The fields were terraced and descended into the valley, one field below another, irrigated by a cunning arrangement of bamboo pipes through which the water could pass to each terrace in turn.

The workers sang as they laboured, a low strange chant that echoed down the valley from one group to another. The drizzle of rain, which put a curtain of grey over the mountain-side on which they worked, was unable to dampen their spirits.

A rift appeared in the mountain ridge and our path side-slipped downwards through the paddy-fields, so that we walked warily along the thin ridges that separated each small field from its neighbour. We slipped at times on the wet surface and plunged into the slime of the paddy, rising to our feet and wading the rest of the way since we were already wet and, therefore, could get no wetter.

It was easy to see some of the men were ill. They pushed on, floundering in the mud, and their faces looked drawn and haggard. Some of them used sticks to help them through the mud and out of the rift up the slippery slopes of the hill-track. I levered my way up on the spear-haft.

In this way we came to Phezachedama, where the Commandos were already ensconced. The chubby Morgan had a roaring fire going in a hut so I stripped off my soaking clothes and hung them over the inferno to dry. The rain hissed on the ground outside and poured off the eaves, but the fire was warm and the tea Ford brewed was cheering, so that I cared little about the weather, but just sat and yarned away the darkening hours until my clothes were ready to wear. I dressed and rolled into my blanket and watched the fire die low to a pile of glowing embers until I fell asleep.

The next day Major Simmonds took a party of men up to the crest of a hill which overlooked Phezachedama and established a position which came to be known as Ponce Fort.

I spent the day erecting a pick-up with tall bamboos which some Nagas cut in the valley and dragged up to the hill-village. It was a long difficult climb and an extremely unpleasant day and when the bamboos arrived at the summit I found them too short to allow for clearance of the huts. Undismayed, the

Nagas returned to the valley and hauled up another two lengths. This took up an awful amount of time. When the poles were trimmed and the tops slotted we dug holes in the ground in which to stand them. The whole village took an interest in the work. Naked children stood in awe and knuckled their teeth. One hole was dug close to a hut so that the pole could be tied to an upright. I tied a yellow flag to each pole and passed the loop-cord through the slot. It required six men on each bamboo to lift the great length into position. The Nagas heaved and strained on the weighty fifty-foot poles and slowly, waveringly, they towered into the air. But the rope had fouled in a notch and would not run smoothly, so down the poles came, gently lest they crash and split. The rope was adjusted and the poles hoisted again. I tugged at the cord ; it ran smoothly across the top of the bamboos. The holes were filled in with stones and earth. The pole near the hut was lashed with statchute cord. I hoped that, blow as it might, the monsoon would not collapse my day's work . . . . and I climbed the hill to Ponce Fort where I covered myself with my ground-sheet, more as a protest than protection, and went to sleep in the steaming grass.

Four Nagas walked into the camp soon after dawn. Two of them carried a bamboo pole across their shoulders. Something heavy was tied to the bamboo, hanging beneath like a trussed pig, jolting and swaying with the bend of the pole as the men walked. They passed my ground-sheet where I lay.

" Good God ! " I exclaimed, looking at the swinging burden. Ford sat bolt upright. He said :

" What's up, sir ? "

" That ! "

I pointed and Ford's eyes bulged as he saw. The swinging bundle was a Jap, dead, his head cloven. There was silence in the camp as the men watched the unsmiling Nagas thread their way through. Without ceremony the mutilated body was flung to the ground before the Colonel who watched cold-eyed and unshaken. He looked at the Nagas and beckoned Kumbo Tabashi. He said :

" Ask them how they caught him. "

Kumbo listened gravely as the men explained.

There was no hint of jubilation in their manner. Their faces wore an expression of cold satisfaction. Kumbo said :

PHEZACHEDAMA

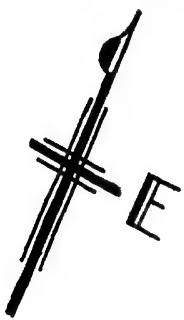
MESSAGE PICK-UP

PONCE FORT

ESCAPE ROUTE

THE KOHIMA ROAD

APPROX · ELEVATIONS  
PHEZACHEDAMA 5,200'  
PONCE FORT 5,700'  
KOHIMA ROAD 5,000'



"This is a man who robbed their village a week ago. He came with a party of soldiers and took their rice and pigs, and now they have killed him. They found him alone in the jungle last night; he was sick with dysentery and malaria."

The tight-lipped Nagas nodded as if they understood. The Colonel said:

"Why did they not bring him alive? Why did they kill him?"

Kumbo shrugged his shoulders.

"They say they will always kill the Japanese when they can. All over my country the people are tired of the cruelty and they are killing the Japanese."

"They say you will not punish their enemies if they bring them to you alive," he ended.

The Colonel snapped:

"Tell them to take it away and bury it! You go with them, Kumbo, and see that they do."

Kumbo shouted an order and the headhunters picked up the pole and shouldered it. I watched the gruesome procession leave the camp. I dismissed Ford's suggestion of breakfast.

Ponce Fort was now occupied by Advance Column H.Q. and its bodyguard, which was Lieutenant Goatley's platoon.

Phezachedama Village was still held by the Commando Platoon whose duty it was to guard the track through the village.

Since we were only a very small body it was important that Ponce Fort be a reasonably secure bivouac. To appreciate our position a description of the site is necessary. The camp, which was held by approximately forty men, lay in a shallow, saucer-shaped depression about 80 yards in diameter, on the crest of a five-hundred foot mound overlooking Phezachedama. Around the lip of the saucer the men had dug slit-trenches large enough to accommodate one man in each. The slopes of the hill on three sides were fairly steep, but the north side was gentle and the footpath from the village straggled along it. Trees covered the area in dense profusion and screened the bivouac on all sides.

In the centre of the saucer men were cutting branches to build bashas as protection from the rain. The ground was a thick paste of mud and mould which we churned up with our boots.

I took the supply-drop that morning. My flare-path lay on the north slope from Ponce Fort to the village, and I stood by the R/T set on the lip of the saucer and guided in the lone Dakota. The white statachutes were brought in by the Nagas who were each rewarded with a shroud which they prized greatly. We kept some of the 'chutes and when the aircraft signalled the end of the drop, I handed two of the white canopies to Kumbo and asked that they be draped over the leafy shelter that was being built for me. The parachutes were waterproof only up to a point ; that is, they would keep out rain until pools formed in the folds when a cascade of water was apt to stream through the saturated material.

Two Nagas built the shelter, under Mister Kumbo's directions. Four branches, forked at the top, were cut and stuck into the soft earth to form corner-poles. Across the forks other poles were laid and tied into place with parachute-cord. This gave us the bare frame-work of the "house". The 'chutes were spread over the frames and down the sides, and long grass and leafy branches were piled over the gleaming white cloth as camouflage. When it was finished it looked quite comfortable. The parachute gave a cheerful clean appearance to the interior, whilst the fresh green foliage of the exterior merged with the natural surroundings. With parachutes as bedding in place of the flea-ridden blankets, Ford and I considered we would enjoy a reasonable amount of comfort . . . . . provided the rain was not too heavy during the night.

Hugh Bond and Junior led their platoons into Ponce Fort that day and restocked their supply of rations. They had successfully raided small parties of Japs on the Kohima road and killed a number of them. They reported large numbers of the enemy in the villages along the road. The raiders were covered in leech-bites, and had suffered great hardship on their expedition, but, quite cheerfully, each man packed fresh rations into his haversack and the platoons set off again on another trip to the road.

The boils on my legs and buttocks were developing rapidly and causing me agony so, refusing a meal of boiled sweet-potatoes which Ford had unearthed, I lay on my parachute-bed to spend the day as comfortably as I could. Donald Gunn visited me and gave me a sedative. I tried to sleep but bouts

of vomiting kept me awake so I was glad of company when Denis Simmonds brought in his tin of English cigarettes and the parcel of Society Gossip papers which had arrived on the supply-drop. It was amusing to read of Mrs. Gupta Mukherjee's tea-party in the grounds of her fine house at Naini Tal. The photographs of philandering young gallants and comely ladies and their dachshunds, in the tennis group at Colonel and Mrs. So-and-So's Bangalore home, provided most enjoyable entertainment. In fact we laughed like hell!

Of course we were not without our entertainment. We were always welcome to drop in on Mister and Mrs. Unpronounceable Two-Syllables at their Angami home in Phezachedama, for a bowl of unpolished rice and a dish of those delicious snails for which her cook is so justly famous. And if there were insects in the *dzu*, what of it? You merely picked them out with your black-nailed fingers and toasted the health of your hostess who, grinning and loudly searching her throat for spittle, would gracefully expectorate into the fire.

The rains came and pooled in the parachute-cloth; the bulging ceiling spewed forth a stream of rainwater and forced us to move everything from the centre of the shelter to the far corners. The ceiling sank lower; it leaked in a dozen places. Ford's Pin-up Girl, cut from a Society page—Miss Julie K—— and friend at Mussoorie—got wet and tore in halves. This made Ford swear. All the time that big hulking brute, Simmonds, hogged the best corner and sat on my bed making the parachute muddy with his hob-nailed boots. I could hardly reproach him since I was busily smoking his English cigarettes.

The strain of the journey through the monsoon was telling on our small band. Faces were thinner; some looked scarcely human under the bristle of beard and matted hair. Most of us were sick. Even the big Irish Ponce Force commander had lost his appetite. His features, once cheerfully ruddy, had become white and drawn. His eyes were listless and gone was the spontaneous wit with which he had salted every remark.

Donald Gunn, himself ill, held the evening sick-parade before Stand To, and it was pitiful to see the line of weak and tired men as they shuffled forward to receive the pills, salve and bandages from the medical mule-box.

*Opposite : A Naga Family return to their Home  
and Wounded Men awaiting Evacuation*







Chindits taking a rest.



Men of the 23rd Brigade at the Rehabilitation Centre.

We were accomplishing something, though. The Japanese had fully believed that we would retire from the Hills rather than face the wrath of the monsoon. But, weak as we were, we were still actively engaged against the enemy, and come storm and blast, we should yet be a menace in the enemy's rear. Naturally we grumbled. We grouched at the mud and at the leeches ; at the fleas, lice, jaundice and dysentery ; at the steepness of the hills, the weight on our backs, the thirst when the sun blazed down and the rain which soaked our clothes when the sun was hidden.

Let us take a look at this little man, coming through the rain at a curious half-trot. He is a Northcountryman, as most of us are, and he swears as he passes the crazy door of our lean-to shelter. He holds a rifle and he is going to stand guard in a water-logged slit-trench. He looks ill.

"What's the matter, Jack?"

"God struth ! Its a bloody big abscess on me arse, sir, and it gives me 'ell when I walk !"

"I've got seven in the same place."

He stares, disbelievingly, and laughs.

"Effing-'ell ! Beggin' your pardon, sir, but if I was you I'd try an' keep 'em for a blinkin' souvenir."

And he walks to his trench, laughing.

He was sick and wet and horribly filthy. He had an abscess that was causing him agony, chafing on the rough clothes with every step he took. He was on his way to stand guard in a wet trench, without shelter from the storm . . . . . and he was grumbling. But something else crept in . . . . . a rough and ready, honest-to-God sense of humour. It is the finest weapon a poor soldier ever had against the hell he sometimes endures.

## CHAPTER 10

### *ATTACK ON PONCE FORT*

I awoke and rubbed my eyes. It was a dull grey dawn. Ford was standing outside in the thin drizzle of rain ; his green shirt was silvered with the morning moisture. I could just see his back through the narrow entrance of the shelter, and I noticed that he held his Sten-gun at the ready. I glanced at my wrist-watch—it was 5.15. I called to him, softly, and he ducked his head through the leafy aperture.

"Is it Stand To?" I asked.

"Yes, sir—nearly over. I didn't wake you because you had a restless night."

I reached for my boots, put them on and stood up. The pain in my leg made me gasp. I reached for the water-bottle; it was empty. I threw it down and Ford handed me a half-filled chagul. I sipped a mouthful and said: "We must have some more water."

Ford rubbed his stubbly chin. He said:

"Wish we could have a wash. I feel lousy."

The silence was oppressive. Not a man moved or spoke outside, and the sound of a rifle shot when it came stung the nerves like a knife-jab so that we jumped at the suddenness of it.

"What was that?"

We listened intently. It came again; another shot, two, three! I said:

"That's no accidental firing."

I went to the entrance and looked out. The Chindits were lying in the grass at the top of the bowl-shaped hollow. A man, doubled low, was coming past the door of the shelter and I stopped him.

"What is it?"

"Attack, sir! Some Japs are coming up the north side."

I ducked inside and picked up my carbine. It was loaded. A babble of voices broke out from the north slope, followed by a high-pitched order in Japanese, and then silence. There was no sound from the crouching Chindits and I went past them to where the Colonel stood. His face was tense; he held a Colt 45 in his hand. Tony Firth and the Doctor were with him. I asked:

"How many are there, sir?"

"About sixty or more."

He cocked his head and listened. There was a faint hum of voices on the north slope. They said:

"Now what are they up to?"

A thunderous volley of shots echoed his words and the whine of slugs sang in our ears. We instinctively crouched lower. The volley ceased but for a few spasmodic shots. Now and again a Sten would chatter or the sharp crack of .303 answered the enemy. Around the perimeter a man stood in each narrow

slit-trench, his eyes watching the thick curtain of trees. I looked at the men around me and saw on the face of each a mask of grim determination and hatred, and I realized that, outnumbered as they were, they would fight to the last bullet rather than be captured and subjected to the inhuman torture meted out to the Essex men at Cheswema.

The weapons were silent again and I left the Colonel and went back to my trench. I slithered into the trench and fumbled for a cigarette but found none. Ford was leaning over the parapet, his cheek on the breach of his gun. I said :

“ Have you a cigarette ? ”

He passed over a squashed packet and resumed the nursing of his gun. Neither of us spoke for a while. I watched his youthful, emaciated face. He was barely twenty. I said to him :

“ This is your first campaign, isn't it ? ”

He turned his head sharply and stared, then his face relaxed in a half smile. He nodded.

“ Worried ? ”

“ A little,” he admitted. He seemed glad to have somebody to whom he could tell it. I lit him a cigarette and passed it over. He drew a couple of puffs and asked :

“ How many are there ? ”

“ The Colonel thinks about sixty.”

We chain-smoked his cigarettes for a while. He nodded to the trees on the north slope and said :

“ Wonder what they are doing now.”

There was no sound from the enemy positions. It was maddening to know they were there and not be able to see them. We watched and waited. The sun was higher now and the rain had ceased. A butterfly fluttered over our heads. I looked at the time ; nearly two hours had passed since the first attack. It seemed like two minutes. We were cramped in the narrow space and I dragged myself on to the parapet and stood upright to stretch my legs. Still no sound . . . . I wondered if the enemy had gone. But as I wondered the shrill voice of the Jap Commander came again—this time from behind us. The voice was harsh and commanding. It was echoed by other voices ; garbled chattering voices ; voices to our right, left, front, rear—we were surrounded. The very trees seemed alive and

unfriendly. The final command rapped out and another volley opened up. I ducked my head as the lead flew past, and dropped into the trench. A sharper and much louder explosion joined in the uproar and a heavy object screamed through the air above us. Ford hissed :

“ Mortar ! They’ve got a bloody mortar on us somewhere ! ”

The noise was terrific. The crack, crack of rifles and the vicious buzz of the missiles like a swarm of angry bees was punctuated with the heavier thud of a mortar. It lasted nearly fifteen minutes in this fashion and then died in intensity, rising and falling again ; shot and reply and sometimes the clatter of a Bren-gun when a khaki-clad shape showed for a fleeting moment through the trees. They were nearer now ! The Jap officer’s voice screamed again from the north side and then bedlam broke loose. The trees disgorged a howling pack of Japanese and they came at a run towards our thin green line of Chindits, firing wildly into our midst.

“ Ch-a-a-arge ! ” they yelled in English as they broke the cover, and the air was hideous with their hysterical screams. We shivered as we watched the mad bayonet-charge hurl itself on us across the clearing.

My ears were pounding with the clamour and I hoped that our line would not falter before the terrifying spectacle. But I had no need to worry. A blast of fire smote the attackers and carved down the leaders almost on top of our trenches, so that the charge was broken and the enemy turned and fled to the shelter of the trees.

We were sweating and we mopped our faces clean, watching the flying dust-spots as the bullets tore the grass. There were five or six dead that the Japs had left behind, but none would cross the clearing in an attempt to bring them in. Our guns were hot and smoking. We fired every time a figure moved in the dark behind the trees. Sometimes the Jap mortar would join in and the metal fragments would whistle past and strike with a dull thud in and around the bivouac. The Jap officer could be heard calling out his commands from one side and then the other, and each high-pitched order was followed by a fusillade of shots into the camp.

We wondered what was the fate of Bill Fazackerley’s Commando Platoon, which had been left in the village below

Ponce Fort. Had they been surprised and overwhelmed? Or had they managed to escape into the nullah?

"Whoomph!" went the mortar and the fragments hissed viciously in our ears. A hefty, dark figure slid into our narrow trench and said in a broad Yorkshire accent:

"Make room for a big 'un."

It was Private Wertley, batman to Major Simmonds. His accent was guaranteed to make you look twice at Private Wertley, who was a broad-built young English negro, with a crop of short woolly hair and a wide white smile. Wertley never got ruffled and his slow Yorkshire speech was as unconcerned and genial as a farmer "up for the day" at Stokesley Show. He opened the bolt of his rifle and slipped in a fresh clip of cartridges. He said:

"Did you see the size of those bastards, sir? Proper big sods. Ah thought all Japs was supposed to be little."

I said:

"Not these boys. They look like Imperial Guard types."

"Ah'll Imperial Guard 'em," said Wertley, ignoring the bullets that suddenly showered over the trench.

The Jap Commander screeched from the west side.

"Yap, yap, yap!" mimicked Wertley, "here the bastards come agen."

The volley burst out afresh and once more the shrieks arose to a deafening crescendo as the Japs charged. The noise was unearthly. They came, slipping from tree to tree, sunlight flashing on the bare steel bayonets, howling like a savage pack of wolves. They were a little more cautious this time and took cover from the forest as they came. Every time a khaki body showed against the foliage, a score of rifles cracked simultaneously. The cornered Chindits were fighting furiously.

A hysterical wail started up behind us and our south side defenders fired into the attack which started on that side. The Brens rippled out short staccato bursts into the frenzied mobs as they came in at the front and rear of our camp. It hardly seemed possible that our morale could face up to the double attack and as the Japanese broke cover and fell on the trenches with bayonet and grenade, I must have thought that this was the end. But the men stood without a flinch and met the steel with bullet and calm courage, and again the enemy was cut down as he reached the trenches. We were swearing and sweat-

ing and the weapons were hot in our hands. Steel for steel and bullet for bullet, the bloody contest was fought and won. As the enemy fell back, the Chindits fired until there was nothing left to shoot at and the jungle was quiet once again.

We had lost only two men in that mad fight but the enemy had lost more. His dead could be seen around the trenches and behind the trees, awkward, motionless figures that looked grotesque in the attitude of death.

The time passed and we sat and stared into the belt of trees. Less than forty, sick in health, emaciated, none knowing the outcome. To evacuate the position seemed hopeless. We were outnumbered and surrounded. Our only chance appeared to be to wait for nightfall and make a break-through in the dark—if we could keep the enemy at bay until then and provided our ammunition did not run out.

There was always the possibility, too, that the enemy would bring up reinforcements and this seemed very probable.

I climbed from the trench and walked to my shelter. I wanted my cigarettes. It was now mid-afternoon. The sun was hot ; there was little cloud about. A deathly stillness clung to the clearing and only the trees whispered of the danger that lurked there. Slanted eyes were watching us, we knew, and all we could do was sit tight and wait . . . . . and wonder.

I chose a cigarette and lit it. I was thirsty and I picked up a half-filled chagul to drink but, remembering that this was our only water, I contented myself with wetting my lips. The pain was throbbing in my leg so I lay down on the damp parachute-bed. A huge bug made room for me. I watched my cigarette smoke drift and curl to the cloth ceiling. All the time I was wondering of the lost Commando Platoon. There was no sound from the village. I hoped to high heaven Bill had got his men away safely.

Voices broke out on the west side, about thirty yards away. A shot was fired and then another, and a man cried out :

“ Don’t shoot ! It’s us—Commandos ! ”

Commandos ! I got to my feet and looked out. Five of our men stood quietly behind the trees, their rifles aimed at the underbrush. A sergeant waved down their arms and called out :

“ Okay ! Come on in . ”

Eight men led by a corporal broke from the bushes and almost staggered into the camp. They were exhausted and in

a pitiful condition. Eight men and a corporal! A section! What had happened to the others? The Colonel walked up.

He said: "Where is Captain Fazackerley?"

"Don't know, sir," panted the corporal, "We were out on a patrol and some Nagas met us just before we got to the village and told us Mister Fazackerley had left and that the Japs were there."

"Captain Fazackerley has left the village?"

The corporal nodded; he looked very weak. He said:

"Yes, sir. The Nagas say he was surprised by the Japs and had to pull out. I thought mebbe he had come here so I came up as well."

The Colonel said: "Didn't you see the enemy, then?"

"Yessir; we saw 'em in the trees just as we got to the top here. One of them shot at us and we dodged behind the trees and then one of our chaps fired at us."

I turned back into the basha. So Bill Fazackerley had got his platoon away; all but this one section. That was good news. Tojo bawled an order again and the shooting recommenced. I went out to the Colonel and sat down with my carbine on my knees. The Colonel's face relaxed and he pointed to the leather belt on which hung my revolver. He said:

"Don't let them catch you with that, or they'll have your scalp."

The belt had belonged to the Jap the Chechama Nagas had killed.

The Doctor started to speak: "These devils—"

He broke off as a man came through the trees and ran down the short slope.

"It's L., sir! He's been hit with a grenade and he's bleeding bad!"

Donald got to his feet immediately. He snapped to his batman:

"Quickly! A blanket!"

He snatched the proffered blanket and followed the messenger up the slope. His thin face, pale with illness, showed no sign of fear as he went out to where the enemy lurked. The M.O.'s batman calmly picked up his Sten-gun and went after him. The C.O. stared stonily at the jungle that swallowed them up, and we listened to the bark of rifles and the sharp stuttering



of machine-guns. Our thoughts were out with Donald on his errand of mercy.

A grenade thudded and the fragments flew. Another one, and another . . . . . the pace was getting hot. The Colonel's face was impassive. He gave no hint of what was in his mind ; his '45 twirled slowly in his fingers as he sat. The big Irishman, Simmonds, picked up two grenades and got to his feet, rather unsteadily. He did not say a word ; simply walked into the forest in the direction taken by the Doctor. We followed him with our eyes.

Tony said : " Denis is ill."

No one answered. The time ticked by ; seconds seemed like hours. Then the bushes parted. It was the Doctor.

Somebody breathed : " Thank Christ !"

The Doctor came down the slope with the limp figure in the blanket borne by the batman and another man. Donald's stubbled face looked tired. He said :

" He's in a bad way. I may have to amputate his legs."

The Colonel's lips moved but he did not speak. He nodded.

The buzz of a light 'plane sounded above the din of battle. It came nearer and I stood up, the better to see. An L.5 was heading for our position, flying low.

The C.O. said : " Is he coming here?"

I said : " Looks like it, sir. I'll warn him off if he orbits."

I picked up the Very gun and slipped in a red cartridge. The 'plane banked and commenced to circle overhead at about 200 feet. I fired the red and it arc-ed skyward. I ejected the empty case, inserted another red, picked up the Walkie-Talkie and spoke into it.

" Ground to aircraft, ground to aircraft—are you receiving me?"

No reply ; the receiver crackled in my ear. I tried again—still no reply. The pilot had evidently not seen my Very. I fired the second cartridge ; it was my last. The 'plane turned steeply and came in just over the tree-tops. I yelled :

" Judas ! He's going to drop !"

Whee ! screamed the mortar and the dust-spots flew. The L.5 waggled its wings as it purred overhead, and I breathed relief when nothing dropped from the open cockpit door. It was a dummy run. I *had* to contact him this time—he *must* not drop !

"Ground to aircraft—are you receiving me?"

No answer. He turned in for the approach. The bullets sang a tenor chorus.

"Ground to aircraft! Ground to aircraft! Do not drop! Do you understand? Do not drop! Return to Base immediately. We are being attacked!"

I was fairly screaming into the transmitter. A voice sounded faint above the crackle in the receiver.

"Aircraft to ground. I am coming in now — —."

The rest was unintelligible. God damn it! He couldn't hear me! He planed down to the tree-tops and I yelled over and over again:

"Do—not—drop! We—are—being—attacked!"

For Pete's sake, I moaned, could he not *see*?

Two canisters left the 'plane, hung in space for a brief moment, and drifted down on their parachutes—right into the Jap lines. The L-5 continued over our heads and we were horrified to see another object leave the cockpit and parachute down. It was a short length of bamboo. Orders from Brigade. The documents were always dropped in a stick of hollow bamboo. The 'chute dropped into the wood where the Japs were attacking in our rear, and the Colonel swore and leapt from his mule-box seat. He took the slope at a run and disappeared into the trees where the Japs hid.

I sat on the box, feeling limp, and watched the now fast-disappearing aeroplane.

The Colonel reappeared in a short while. He brushed aside the spidery arms of a thorn bush and dropped into the camp. He held the bamboo tube in his left hand; his right grasped his '45 Colt automatic; blood trickled from thorn scratches on both arms; a rent in his trousers disclosed his knee. He raised the bamboo in triumph and smiled. When he smiled you knew why they called him "Boy".

The forest was quiet again. The sky, which had been bright all day, was now overcast and rain threatened. It was still very sultry and we were thirsty but the Colonel had given orders that no one must drink unless the Doctor deemed it advisable. Water was something of a problem. We were unable to replenish empty bottles and this state of affairs might go on for God knows how long. The men stayed at their posts. They were just remembering they had eaten nothing all

day and it was now five-thirty. Parched lips sucked at pebbles, grass, buttons, anything. Beard-stubble, hollows, grime and sweat made Frankensteins of our faces.

The M.O. was fighting for the life of the wounded Chindit. Blood plasma flowed through a tube into the tortured body. Donald Gunn worked quickly and efficiently, without rest.

It was interesting to see the faces around me. There was Denis Simmonds, big-built, pale, stubble-cheeked. He sat on a mound watching the Doctor, saying nothing, simply staring. His large hands played with a grenade, rolling it round and round in his fingers. The Colonel sat on his mule-box. He was burning his papers. His fingers were steady as he held the flaming match and his face betrayed no emotion as he watched the fire eat its way up the sheaf of documents. Baxter, the youthful intelligence clerk, was looking fixedly into space. His eyes, red-rimmed, were unseeing. He fumbled with a stone and his hands shook with the illness that wracked his body. No one spoke. Each was concerned with his own thoughts. The man with the Bren-gun on the bank above the big Irish Major took his eyes from the green wall for an instant and looked in his shirt for a cigarette. He found one and put it between his lips. It was crumpled. His gaze strayed back to the trees and he absently struck a match and lit the cigarette. The blue smoke curled and streamed on a slight breeze that stirred the branches and made the leaves rustle so that we looked up for a brief moment before eyes wandered back and rested again on emptiness.

There was something damnable about the silence, I thought. It was a quietness that was *too* quiet. It pounded on the ears like a roaring of high winds and struck deep into the nerves because we expected *something* but it seemed as though it would never happen. Yet it had to happen. It was annoying ; like a dog with no tail. Sometimes a man would get up and walk across the camp and you followed him with your eyes and wondered why he did not drop with a bullet in him. He walked three steps, four, five, and you waited for the shot which you knew must come but never did. That seemed awful, somehow. He should have died but he remained alive. It was not that you wanted him to die, but if he had you would have felt that nothing was out of the ordinary. The silence would

have been smashed and you would feel mad at his death ; fighting mad ; a roaring, seething, don't-give-a-damn kind of madness that would pull you out of this dull, frightening, sinister mood. But, no ! The trees just whispered and you knew their greenness hid a black heart. And when a bee buzzed about your head you suddenly hated it because it was a part of the nature which was hiding your enemy. You brushed your hand at it spitefully because it looked peaceful and you hated peace, wanting the noise of battle so that you knew where you stood in the pattern of the enemy's plans.

These were my own thoughts, jumbled, uneasy, nervous. Men feel this way in such circumstances. I don't think it was the fear of death ; we had lost that. How can I explain it ? It was inward excitement without means of outward expression. Like a mute, his heart bursting with patriotism, trying to shout " God Save the King ". The restless chafing against inactivity. The feeling of wanting to do something—anything—to break the monotony. It affects men in many ways. Some whistle, some laugh—at almost anything, some chain-smoke, a few pray. Some make designs on the ground with the heel of their boot, toss pebbles, chew grass. I chew matches. This time I had only one match ; I chewed that to pulp.

The Doctor raised his head. He spoke softly.

" He's gone, sir."

The Colonel nodded. His face looked troubled for a moment. He said :

" Get some rest, Don."

Donald walked away and lit a cigarette. I saw his hands. Small and efficient, the pale skin was streaked with blood. His broad shoulders were bent. The vitality was sapped from his weary body. He hated defeat when he struggled with fate for the life of a man, but he never gave in.

Somebody started to whistle quietly. His neighbour snarled : " Shut up ! Blast you ! You get on my nerves !"

The whistling ceased abruptly and the solitude closed in again. The sun was losing its heat. A breeze stirred the trees and cleaved the humid air with its cool draught. The little, thin man next to me spoke in a hoarse whisper.

He said : " Damn them ! Why don't they start something ?"

The trees alone rustled a reply. The thin man's eyes never left the green wall. They darted left to right along the rows

of upright trunks, as if striving to see beyond them into the unknown blackness. They were restless eyes, small, black and troubled. His thoughts were obvious. They are many and we are few. They have us trapped. Why don't they shoot? Shoot, you lousy bastards! Shoot! Shoot, and be damned to you! He was puzzled. He could not understand the meaning of the long silence. He was a soldier and understood action but this was something beyond his comprehension. Something mysterious and hateful. God in merciful heaven! Give us noise and bullets and a cold-steel charge and the screams of the wounded, but in the name of mercy stop this silence! My watch ticked away the seconds and each small quick tick was the throb of a drum that impinged on the brain and scarcely died before the next pulse came.

Then it happened—a sharp *clop*! and the vicious whine that followed it—and the suspense was over. The enemy's diabolical screams of hate came from the north slope and relief showed on the grimy faces of the Chindits as they hugged their rifles and waited for the charge. The climax came with all its sound and fury when the shrieking mob burst from the foliage in an all-out attempt to smother the little camp. Our guns chattered frantically; Stens, rifles, revolvers and the two Bren-guns, spitting into the Japanese. The enemy mortar raised its voice and the fragments flew with sickening frightfulness. Grenades joined in with their thudding and whining and the awful peace was forgotten in the awful bedlam. Now we knew where we stood. There was no mystery about this give-and-take battle for our existence. The jungle-fighters slammed cartridge after cartridge into the breech and wherever a khaki figure showed for a moment a round sped to its mark. God help us if the ammunition runs out. How long will it last? A snarling Japanese giant of the Imperial Guard leapt into a slit-trench and bayoneted the occupant, stabbing savagely again and again into the fallen body. The hate on his face turned to stupid surprise as a bullet drilled him clean, and he fell on his victim in the bottom of the trench. Two more broke through, screaming English book-learned phrases—"Drop your gun!"—"Surrender!"—"Charge!"—and dropped dead in the hail that greeted them.

Peter Goatley stared at the bloody mess of his hand a bare second after the grenade had burst in front of him. A man of

his platoon lay at his feet, lifeless. The Doctor raced up and hustled Peter away to the comparative safety of a mound.

As quickly as it had begun the battle ended as the enemy withdrew for the third time into the forest. They were still unable to take us.

The shooting now was infrequent. We were loath to spend a single round unless it bought death for a Japanese soldier. Our ammunition was running low. The Colonel called the officers around him. He said: "We shall evacuate the position after dusk, if it's possible. That will mean destroying the radio and anything else we cannot carry." He looked at the Doctor, who was bandaging Peter's mangled hand, and said:

"I'm afraid your medical panniers will have to go, Donald."

Donald Gunn said, simply: "I'll carry what I can, sir."

"Right. Norman—!" The C.O. spoke to Captain Wright. "Divide the money among the men, and bury any we cannot carry. I'll give the word when we will leave."

Dusk settled and deepened into night. Sometimes a shot rang out but we could see nothing in the blackness beyond our perimeter. There was no moon. Quickly and silently, the wireless-set was destroyed and thrown into a slit-trench. Our dead were lowered on top of the wrecked equipment and the earth was heaped into the trench. The grave was hidden beneath a carpet of dead leaves and rotting vegetation so that when the work was finished none could tell of its presence.

Sergeant-Major Woods approached me from the darkness. He whispered: "I'm afraid I've got to ask you for your batman, sir. We need the batmen to stay behind whilst we slip out." I bit my lip. Poor Ford. He was just a kid; new to all this.

I said: "I'll tell him, Sergeant-Major."

He limped off. I told Ford. He was upset at first. I took his arm, and said: "It's got to be done. Don't worry—you'll get out."

It sounded so futile and meaningless, but I hardly knew what else to say. He just stood without saying a word.

"I'll see you soon. You'd better go now."

It seemed so heartless. He might never get out. He was expendable. But, then, none of us might escape. We were still surrounded and the enemy would be expecting us to attempt a get-away under cover of darkness.

I turned away and hurriedly packed. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ford go to his trench. I wondered if I would see him again.

I put my harness on. God-damn! That hurt! The rough webbing side-pack and water-bottle chafed the sores on my hips. When I strapped the back-pack to my shoulders I found it less painful to bear than the side-equipment, since there were no sores on my back. The *kukri* knife, which I usually carried at my side, I strapped to the back-pack. The knife slipped from the scabbard and fell to the ground. Only much later did I notice the loss.

The Chindits lined up to depart. Forgotten Men? No. England has not forgotten them. You cannot forget men of whom you have never heard; whose exploits are relegated to the insignificance of a single-column paragraph between the obituaries and the cross-word puzzle on the back page of the Sunday paper.

Silently, soberly, they filed out into the forest to God knows what! The Colonel was leading, walking on a compass bearing through the blackness that swallowed him up so that the man behind him had need to hurry lest he be lost. Progress was slow. Trees loomed out and struck us, unseen by our straining eyes until they almost touched our faces. The man I was following stopped abruptly and I collided with his heavy pack. He stood for a moment, listening. I whispered: "What is wrong?" He put his mouth close to my ear and breathed:

"I can't find the man in front of me. Can you hear them?"

There was no sound, nothing but the wind sighing in the branches. I fumbled for my pocket compass, snapped it open and read our bearing. We were ten degrees off course. I said in a low voice: "Follow me, and for Christ's sake keep quiet."

Down the side of the hill we went, not daring to make a sound, inwardly cursing the dead-wood which crackled under our feet and which our taut nerves magnified to the proportion of thunder. We expected every minute to walk into the enemy. We expected the splutter of rifle fire and a volley in our backs. We expected anything, everything, and hoped for nothing. Curse the blackness! We cannot see! The ground would drop where there was an invisible pit and down we would go, one by one. Each heard the man in front drop but he had to go

on himself because he could see no way round and it was fatal to lose sight of the man ahead.

## CHAPTER 11

*EXODUS*

I fell rather than stepped on to the track. The ground which had been sloping beneath my feet suddenly dropped and my toes found air and then a jolt which shook my spine. I could just make out the grey ribbon left and right of me that told me of the track. It was the road through Phezachedama, and the enemy were five hundred feet above us now. The man behind me dropped with a thud and cursed. I motioned him to silence. We waited for the others ; they came one at a time, each unsuspecting the drop before him. When the last man appeared I counted them. They were ten. I whispered : " Any more ? "

" No, sir—we're all here. "

" Good. Don't make a sound. Two of you walk along the track that way and see if you can find the Colonel's party. I'll look this way. "

I turned right, toward Phezachedama. I walked quietly, hugging the side of the track where the gloom was deepest. I had only gone about two hundred yards when I saw shadowy figures a few feet away. A voice said : " Who goes there ? "

" R.A.F. officer. Where's the Colonel ? "

" He's here. "

I said : " All right, I'm coming back again with ten men, so don't shoot. "

I returned to the waiting men and brought them back to the Colonel's group.

They were leaving the track, descending into the nullah. I joined in the wake of the last man and the other ten followed me.

The ground was worse now, steeper and pitted with holes that dropped a man with an alarming jerk. The trees seemed more numerous and the undergrowth tore at the clothes and flesh with invisible fingers, renting garments and leaving angry red scratches on the skin. Ahead of me Peter Goatley stumbled and tripped, impeded by his right arm which was bound in



a sling so that he could not use it to clutch at vines and branches to help his progress.

A fusillade of shots from above shattered the silence. It sounded like another attack on the camp. I thought of Ford and inwardly prayed for his safety. They should be leaving by now. Suppose they had been trapped as they sneaked out? It was a horrible thought. The shooting continued in short sharp bursts for a few minutes and then stopped.

We were hot with exertion. A yawning crevice appeared at Peter's feet, and he slithered down. The pain from his hand wrung a moan from his lips. I looked down into the dark abyss but could not see him. His voice came up low and gasping.

"Slide—down! It's too—steep to walk."

I whispered it back to the others and lowered myself gingerly to the earth, then, easing forward, foot by foot, I found the drop and slid down on my haunches. But it was steeper than I thought and my slide increased in momentum, the rough ground scraping at my sores until I almost shouted with pain. The others followed with a rush and one man gave an involuntary cry as his ankle twisted beneath him. Another savagely snarled at him to shut his mouth and it looked like the makings of a first-class fight.

I hissed: "Be quiet!"

They subsided, muttering. Their nerves and tempers were frayed. My own ire was roused. I struck fiercely and resentfully at a creeper which lashed at my face. Christ! If only we could *see* where we were going! Down and down, we stumbled and fell, slithered and tripped. Downwards to the nullah bed which lay five thousand feet below, somewhere in the dark beyond. Sometimes a man's temper got the better of him and he swore at some obstacle in his path; the others would urge him to silence. We came to what appeared to be a tunnel caused by undergrowth hanging over a cleft in the rock. It sloped dangerously and we had to feel our way down every foot of the way. A man incautiously struck a match the better to see. It was struck from his hand. He said viciously: "What the hell did you do that for? I can't see!"

The other answered:

"You bloody fool! Do you want us all to get caught?"

"I'll knock your effing head off, you——!"

"Shut up for Christ's sake!"

Others hissed at them. Their voices came to me out of the dark ; I couldn't see a thing in front of me. There was silence again save for the laboured breathing and the crackle of the undergrowth. Another fell and twisted his ankle ; his rifle clattered to the ground. We struggled along like this for over two hours. My watch showed thirty-five minutes past midnight. God knows what distance we had travelled ; it could not have been far. The Colonel halted and said :

" We can't go any further like this. Take off your packs and try to get some rest. Each man find a tree to put his feet on."

To find a tree was necessary for lying down. It prevented a man from sliding down the steep hillside in his sleep. But none of us slept, though we were thoroughly exhausted. Despite the tree we found ourselves sliding until our legs bent double against the tree trunk. A soldier indiscreetly lit a cigarette and it was snatched away. Some were losing all sense of caution due to frayed nerves and sickness. To cap it all the rains came and we pulled out our ground-sheets and cowered under them in the damp, smelly mould.

At the first sign of dawn we rose and set off again. As the light increased we began to see where we were going. Trees took shape and pot-holes became visible ; our progress was much easier. In time we emerged from the forest and found ourselves in the valley. We decided to make for the shelter of the trees at the end of the ravine on the opposite bank of the stream. On both sides and in front of us towered the wood-covered sides of the valley. Looking back, I was amazed at the steepness of the mountain we had descended in the all-obscuring gloom. Down here, in this deep cleft in the earth, there were no foot-paths. The ground was strewn with boulders and the stream splashed along at a brisk flow between the rocks, making water-falls where it hurtled over stone ledges. The air was filled with the roar of rushing waters. Masses of rich green vegetation spread everywhere in loose profusion. It was like a lost world. Nothing moved in its depths save the flowing stream and the thirty-odd men who filed along the river bank. Even the birds and brightly-coloured butterflies seemed to have forgotten this valley. It would have seemed peaceful but for the Japanese who camped on the road that circumnavigated the ravine ; the convoy-road to Kohima which lay on the hill-tops above us.

[We edged across a waterfall and the strong current whipped at our ankles. The spray stung our faces. We forded the river and arrived at the end of the valley where we toiled the hill-slopes and buried ourselves in the forest.

"And here," said the Colonel, "we stay all day—until dusk at least. Every man will fill his bottle and chagul and get a wash, but no one must stay by the river more than a few minutes. The Japanese are above and can see into the valley, so when you have washed get back here under the trees and remain here. Get as much rest as you can."

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All that day we lay on the slope with our feet propped against trees. We had but one day's rations, so we were ordered to consume only half. It was impossible to forecast how long this state of affairs would last, or how long before we could take another supply-drop. At present the latter was completely out of the question. None of us felt very hungry, however, despite the fact that we had not eaten all the previous day. Most stomachs jibbed at the prospect of food. Nobody felt like talking. The men just lay and meditated and tried to sleep—and could not. The Doctor bade me strip. He examined my sores, and said he would operate as soon as it was possible.

At six p.m. a group of Nagas were spotted in the valley, approaching our hide-out. As they drew near we were surprised to recognize the muscular Semini, followed by Kumbo, the Naga Scout-leader, Kumalo, and a few Scouts. They were all unarmed except for spears.

The faithful Kumbo told their story. In spite of our precautions and the wild out-of-the-way retreat we had chosen to conceal ourselves, they had tracked us and discovered our whereabouts. Now they had come to guide us to safety. Had they seen anything of Captain Fazackerley's luckless platoon? we asked. Yes, they had. The Commandos were now on their way back to Chosumi. What about the Japanese at Ponce Fort? We could not reach safety unless we went back on the track below that position. The enemy, they informed us, had taken our camp and were still there, but Semini promised to guide us through Phezachedama under the Japs' noses with reasonable security. How? He would arrange that the track was guarded on each side of the village by Nagas. The Nagas

were poorly equipped to deal with the enemy at Ponce Fort, but at least they might raise the alarm should anything untoward occur. Anyway, it was a chance we had to take. We accepted. It was agreed that Kumbo would take us back to Phezachedama on a secret path he knew and that we would set off at dusk. Semini was happy that he could help us and he immediately returned alone to Phezachedama to arrange the guards for the track.

Kumbo told us an amazing thing. The Chindit who had been bayoneted in his trench by the big Jap had not died although he suffered seven wounds, one of them in his eye. After dark he had managed to crawl away, weak from his wounds and loss of blood, and, evading the Japs, had met some Nagas near Phezachedama. These men had roughly dressed his injuries and, constructing a stretcher from bamboo, had set off to carry him to the column now mustered at Chosumi. Kumbo added that the Japanese losses were estimated at fifteen killed and four wounded. Two of the latter were so badly hurt, he said, that they would not live. That cheered us greatly.

At dusk we started off, following Kumbo's broad shoulders. We skirted the river, crossed at the waterfall and clambered over huge boulders until at last we found ourselves on a narrow path under the trees. It was a mere wisp of a track etched on the slope of the mountain long ago by the naked feet of men, and now forgotten. It was weed-grown and the great branches of trees hung over it like an arch, but even as the dusk thickened Kumbo led us unerringly along the thin straggling route which he seemed to know by instinct rather than vision. It was a gentle trail ; it zig-zagged up the mountain instead of the usual almost vertical ascent of most Naga paths.

After two hours we came to the Phezachedama road. Kumbo informed us that the village lay barely a mile away, so with the strictest injunctions to silence we headed for it.

I shall never forget that march through Phezachedama. For half-a-mile each side of the village and through the village itself the track was lined on both sides by a grim line of naked men. They stood, each gripping a spear or a *lapok*, and watched us pass. There was none of the usual Naga shouts of welcome ; no one spoke a word to us—they understood the danger of sound. Impassive, silent, they stood on guard as we filtered through beneath the enemy noses, and probably

felt a pang of pity for the thirty-odd sick whites who stumbled in the red dust. Semini, the honest Gaumbara of Phezachedama, had done his work well. Through the village and out along the track we filed, and still the two rows of Nagas stood with watchful eyes and spears at the ready, until finally, half-a-mile out of the village and away from the Japanese at Ponce Fort, the lines of naked sentries ended and we found ourselves alone once more. Semini had joined the Colonel at the head of the band and he and Kumbo showed us to the summit of a high hill at the side of the track where we could stay during the hours of darkness with a feeling of reasonable security. Semini returned to his hut at Phezachedama.

Despite the heavy rain which lashed down most of the night, many of us managed to sleep, and we awoke at dawn to find the hill enveloped in a thick mantle of grey cloud. The smoke of fires would not be visible because of the cloud-mist so the Colonel decided we could brew some tea—our first since the day before the siege.

The wood was wet and made fire-lighting a difficult business, but we buckled in and mastered the task. The tea was cheering and we felt better. We sat around in wet garments, talking over the mugs of hot liquid.

Semini visited us during the day. With him, came the headman of another village who carried the usual Japanese demand-note for rice and pigs. There was nothing we could do to help him, however. The Colonel gave Semini a message to the column at Chosumi, giving the facts of our plight and asking them to radio for a 'plane to drop supplies to us at Therepesemi in two days' time. Semini promised to send his fastest runner.

We heard the engines of a Dakota drone over our heads during the afternoon. It orbited continually but the cloud which still clung to our hill-top concealed us from view. There was nothing I could do to attract the pilot's attention; our radio was smashed, buried with the dead above Phezachedama; it was no use lighting a bonfire. The aircraft flew away.

Semini came back after giving our message to a runner and—most welcome sight of all—he brought our "expendables" with him. There was Ford, his pale face grinning as he told how the Japs had staged a short attack and he had shot one of them dead. Good old Ford! It was good to see him.

The cloud cleared and the rain stopped. Semini's runner arrived with a reply from Lieutenant Donald Britton. Don said that Major Hoyle had taken 33 Column to Cheswezumi, nearer Kohima; that he (Donald) and the "Soft Elements" were still at Chosumi, that the Snakepit was now clear of the Japs and that the situation at Kohima looked a bit brighter. He ended with the news that he was now asking Base for a supply-drop for us.

Since the Snakepit was cleared of the enemy Lt.-Col. Stevens decided to evacuate Peter Goatley, whose condition was worsening, to Chosumi, from where he would start the long stretcher journey to Mokokchung. Semini ordered his Nagas to build a stretcher and when this was done, Peter said his goodbyes and set off down the mountainside, borne on the shoulders of four stalwart Angamis. Peter was horribly ill.

We ate what little there was left of our rations and stayed on the hill-top another rainy night. The following morning we descended the hill and moved to Therepesemi. Baxter was very ill on that journey. He seemed almost at breaking point. Despite our frequent halts for rest men dropped out at intervals suffering weakness and exhaustion. This was particularly the case when the track wound uphill. We found the strain of the ascent and the weight of our equipment very fatiguing. When we limped into Therepesemi it was a silent assembly that gathered to greet us. No one smiled or cheered as they had done when we had passed through a week before. They watched, mutely, and their eyes were full of sympathy. Then they came forward, shyly at first, and spoke to Kumbo Tabashi. Kumbo said:

"They want to carry your packs."

The Colonel smiled faintly.

"Then let them."

Willing hands took the heavy equipment and transferred it to naked brown backs. We walked up the ascending terraces, between the huts, to the dwellings set apart for us at the summit of the village built on a hill.

Three rifle shots smote our ears with a deafening suddenness. Our high-strung nerves jumped.

Tony Firth snapped: "What was that, Kumbo?"

Kumbo questioned the headman. He translated the reply:

"There is a burial in the village, sir. A woman has died and some of the Scouts are honouring her grave with their shooting."

"Well, God-damn! Do they *have* to chose a time like this?"

Kumbo was silent.

Tony said: "I'm sorry—never mind."

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I had no white cloth to form the identity letter for the Dakota when it came, so I had the Therepesemi Nagas split some bamboo into thin strips. The inside of the hollow tubes was white and with these strips I laid out the letter "A" on a paddy-field in the village. Identification was doubly necessary since I was without a radio-set, Aldis lamp or cartridges for my Very pistol.

The lone aircraft arrived at nine o'clock and successfully dropped the much-needed bundles of food and ammunition. There were also some Very signal cartridges and a new Aldis, but no battery.

There was a hill overlooking the village which made our bivouac strategically unsound. At Orders, that evening, Lt.-Col. Stevens expressed his intention of moving us up the hill immediately following First Light the next morning. We would be safer there. We went to bed that night on parachutes in Naga huts.

I can hardly remember much of the first part of the evening except that at about half-past ten I found myself standing outside being violently sick. The Doctor was with me. He said:

"Take it easy."

"How did I get here?"

"You got up and came out yourself. You've been moaning with pain ever since you went to bed."

"Have I?"

"Here," he said, shaking a couple of white pills from a box, "take these."

"What are they?"

"Barbetone. It'll help you sleep."

I swallowed them with a gulp of water from my bottle.

"Now go back to bed."

Tony Firth came along. He said:

"Get your packs on at once! We're moving."

"What's wrong?"

"The Nagas have reported a Jap move on the village, so we're going to the top now instead of at dawn, blast it!"

Coolies had to be recruited at a moment's notice to carry up the supplies which the Dakota had dropped. Donald Gunn gave my side equipment to Kumbo to carry. I was able to cope with the back-pack. The aircraft had dropped to us a gunny-sack containing four thousand silver rupees. This was given to a Naga to carry and I was appointed Officer i/c The Cash to ensure its safety. And so up we went, through the trees to the hill-top, where we spread our ground-sheets, appointed our British and Naga sentries and lay down to await developments. But nothing happened.

The weather was foul all next day. Everyone dug fox-holes. Kumbo instructed two Nagas to build Ford and me a shelter. They dug a pit some five feet deep, and built a frame of branches over it which they covered first with parachute cloth, then with our ground-sheets and finally camouflaged it with foliage. They constructed two rough bamboo beds simply by laying split lengths of the cane across the pit, supported on earth ledges about two feet from the floor. It was Home Sweet Home. Only a little rain managed to get in.

We spent three days in our fox-holes and the weather was foul. My condition rapidly grew worse until I was unable to sit or stand owing to violent internal pains. Donald Gunn decided to operate on the large abscesses which covered my legs and nether regions. This was on the third day. He had no anaesthetic but gave me a shot of morphia. Poor Donald; he was badly off for medical equipment. All he had was the First Aid pack he had carried on his shoulders when we evacuated Ponce Fort. However, he cut the two largest wounds which made me gasp and grip the sides of my bamboo bed, but decided that I must be evacuated on the morrow since I was a case for the hospital to deal with. Kumbo was a good nurse. He brought me some large red bananas out of the jungle and a gourd of the finest rice wine I have ever tasted. The next morning a light 'plane appeared and orbited in our area. I struggled out of the fox-hole minus my trousers and fired a few green signals but to no avail. He flew away without seeing.



Later in the day, my bamboo stretcher had been completed and I walked rather unsteadily to it. Ford came with me. He was to be my bodyguard and since he was suffering from acute dysentery he would enter hospital, too. I looked at the dirty bearded faces around me. I was going out and they weren't. I wondered if they were resentful. One man stared at me and then deliberately winked, his face broadening into a slow, wide smile. He said:

"Good luck, sir. I hope you'll soon get better."

I knew he meant it; I wished him good luck, also. I felt dizzy and lay down on the stretcher; Donald bound me to it with parachute-cord for safety. The Colonel and Norman Wright approached. The C.O. extended his hand. He said:

"Goodbye for now. I hope we'll see you on your feet again soon—when we get out."

"I expect so, sir."

"Take care of yourself. I'm sending Kumalo and some of his Scouts to see you through."

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I do not wish to bore the reader with a detailed account of the journey.

Two Naga Scouts, inconspicuous without their rifles, went on ahead of my stretcher to ensure that the track and the villages were clear of the enemy. Wandering Jap patrols were known to be in the area. Ford walked beside me and armed Nagas walked ahead and behind. The stretcher tilted alarmingly whenever the bearers climbed or descended a steep slope. They travelled at a jog-trot which imparted a sudden jolting motion to the stretcher and was extremely painful. The stretcher-bearers were relieved by fresh men at every village to which we came. The Gaumbaras were only too pleased to supply new bearers though I had no money with which to pay them.

Eventually, after many hours we reached Cheswezumi and Major Hoyle's Column. I saw Reynold Newcombe. He was just recovering from a bout of malaria. He came into the hut in which I lay and we chatted until Captain Doupe, 33 Column's Medical Officer, sent Blondie on his way. The Doctor wanted to operate.

Captain Doupe jabbed a hypodermic needle into my arm and told me to count. I counted up to twenty-four and passed out. When I recovered consciousness I found my legs and seat swathed in bandages and—oh, the relief from pain!

The following morning, Sam Hoyle came to the hut and brought me cheering news. The road from Cheswezumi, where I lay, to Kohima was free from Japs. The enemy had been repulsed at Kohima and were retreating along the south road toward Imphal.

"You'll be able to go to Kohima now, instead of having to travel to Mokokchung," said the slim, fair-haired Major.

"Thank heavens for that."

"I'm sending a section with you as escort. There's still a possibility of loose odds and sods wandering around. The section will take you as far as Chakhabama on the Kohima road, about thirteen miles from the town. There's an advanced Field Medical Unit there and they're running jeep-ambulances back into Kohima." Sam looked at his watch. He said:

"I'll see you later."

He paused at the entrance.

"You had better stay here another night and go in the morning. I want to get confirmation about the track to Kohima; it's not absolutely certain yet."

"Very well."

"And, besides, you'll be taking a prisoner out with you. Donald Britton's sending him down in the morning. See he doesn't commit *hari-kiri*."

Oh, help! Wet-nurse to a Jap.

I saw Major Henschman during the day. He was in the next hut and, feeling tired of lying on my back, I got up and went in to him. He was eating a meal of bacon, eggs, toast and marmalade. That man could conjure food out of the sea if he was marooned on a raft. I hadn't seen such food for nearly three months and I felt that if I walked in at eight p.m. I could almost expect his servant, the faithful Havildarji, to produce champagne and caviare.

The big Major was finishing the last of his egg when I tottered in. He looked up in surprise and said:

"Good Lord! A ghost! I heard you had come in and I was coming to see you. How do you feel?"

"Not so bad. Where's Ywin?"

"He's with your column up at Chosumi."

He spread his hands at the empty plate.

"I can't offer you eggs, but have some marmalade."

I said: "Major, you're an angel from Heaven. Thank you—I will."

Toast and marmalade! I ate three thick slices, and felt I was imposing on his generosity, but I couldn't help it. It was a royal feast . . . . . I went back to my stretcher bed and enjoyed a most delightful stomach-ache.

Early next morning, remembering I had no money, I sent a Naga runner to Chosumi, eight miles away, with a message asking Don Britton for fifty rupees. The money arrived at eleven a.m. with the prisoner and his escort. The thoughtful Donald had included some cigarettes with a humorous note which read:

"My darling,

Received your *billet doux* this morning. You bloody scrounger. Still you did bring the good news from Aix to Ghent." (I can only assume he referred to the news of the Colonel's safety.) "I am sending Rs.50 to pay for whatever services—considering you required an operation on your back-side—others may have rendered . . . . . Hope you do get well quickly as I know what it's like to be laid up just now. If you want a morning stroll, meet me by 'Ye Olde Snakepit' at M.S. 28 and we'll go and have a quick one.

Donald."

Major Hoyle came in to say goodbye before I left.

I asked: "Have you any further news of Colonel Stevens?"

Sam said: "They're on their way out; going back to the 'Soft Elements' at Chosumi. I don't think they'll have any difficulty getting there."

"Thank heaven for that."

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The Jap was a youngster of twenty, from Yokohama. That is all I could get out of him, due to language difficulties. He walked behind my stretcher and gave no trouble except when, on one occasion, he tried to jump off the track and over the precipice at our side. (This happened about sixteen miles from Kohima, when, passing along a track which wound along the side of a deep ravine, we walked through the remains of a huge

Jap camp. The litter of wrecked equipment, mortar cases, bodies of men and the bloated carcasses of dead mules lay everywhere and the foetid stench made even the Naga stretcher-bearers hold their noses in disgust. I think the evidence of such a terrible Japanese defeat preyed on his nerves to such an extent that he made the attempt at suicide. He was foiled by his guards.) The Jap had been captured by a party of Nagas, who, passing a bamboo hut in a paddy-field, heard sounds of movement inside and went in to investigate. They found him cleaning his rifle; he had the bolt out. They tied his hands and took him to Donald Britton and the column at Chosumi. He must consider himself a very lucky young man, because by this time the Nagas had developed a craze for the blood of lone Japs. They took him into Donald's Naga hut for questioning. Inside the hut was a crude, three-legged, wooden stool, and seeing this, he ran to the stool, knelt down, and placed his head on it, waiting for the end which he thought must come. He was very surprised when he found he was not to be executed.

There was another stretcher in the party—a sergeant suffering malignant malaria. Also with us were two bearded Sikhs, who had escaped from the Japanese and were going to Kohima to report back to the Army.

We stayed the night in a large hut formerly used for storing rice. This was in a small Naga village. There was a guard of two Chindits watching the prisoner all night, though most of us were awake the whole time due to the attentions of countless mosquitoes.

Next morning, we breakfasted off cheese and biscuits, and Tojo (we could think of no better name) glared malevolently at us over the cooked rice we gave him. He had a repulsive face, thin and yellow; his lips curled savagely whenever he looked at us; the cartoonist's idea of a typical Jap.

We set off again on the last march to Chakhabama. The bridge over the swift stream near the road-head was destroyed; blown up by the Japs in their retreat. A new wooden one had been constructed by Army engineers, however, and we crossed that to the waiting jeep-ambulances.

There were crowds of Indian sepoy sitting near the bridge, eating a meal of *chupattis* and rice. They stared at us as we

threaded our way between them, gaping at the Jap and muttering *Japani wallah* and *Dushman\** and several pointed at my recumbent body and told the others I was a *Japani wallah*. (I forgave them for this when, later, in the Kohima Casualty Clearing Station, I was given a mirror and found myself looking at a strange sub-human with sunken, dirty cheeks covered in a black hirsute growth, whose dark hair lay matted and thick on its neck.)

An R.A.M.C. officer pushed through the Indians and approached us. He looked harassed, sweated copiously. He said :

" Who the hell are you ?"

" Doctor Livingstone. Who the hell are you ?"

He stared for a moment and then relaxed in a smile.

" I'm a doctor."

" And I'm an R.A.F. officer—believe it or not."

The ice was broken. He said :

" I'm sorry I snapped at you. There've been so many cases coming through from up front that I'm tired out."

He looked it. He said :

" Where've you come from? God, you're in a mess !"

I pointed to the hills behind the Japs.

" From there."

" Bale out ?"

" No—I've been in with 23 Brigade."

" Marching ?"

" Marching."

His jaw hung loose.

" My God ! What's the Air Force coming to ?"

And so into a jeep-ambulance and along the road to the Advanced Aid Post, where the medicos checked us over, gave us tea, and put us back into a field ambulance for Kohima. Ford, they decided, was a hospital case. He went to Kohima in another ambulance and I saw no more of him until we met in hospital at Dimapur.

I was horrified at the scene of destruction that was Kohima. The trees were blackened stumps that stuck up, nude and obscene, in a grim waste of smashed huts and shelled ruins. It is true that some of the town, the tin-roofed bazaar-shops

\* Enemy (Hindusthani).

of the Indian merchants, had escaped total destruction, but the general picture was one of strife and desolation.

The little town had withstood the long siege and suffered constant shelling, but now the people came out and surveyed the ruins and went straight to work to rebuild Kohima. The Army was much in evidence, directing the lines of traffic that rumbled through on their way to the front, repairing the water-supply system, restoring the telephonic communications, clearing away the debris and helping the fallen township to its feet.

The motor-vehicles, the telephones and the concrete roads! They made me blink. It all seemed so strange to see them again. I was almost disinclined to believe it at first.

The little Polish doctor who put me to bed was very kind. He gave me a mirror and danced about excitedly as I peered at myself.

"Look at yourself," he said. "That beard and that hair! They must not be cut. A wash, yes—you shall have warm water and the orderly shall wash you all over. But that beard—it must stay! You must let them see you like that at Dimapur!"

"But why, Doctor?"

"It looks so—well, because I want them to."

But I managed to persuade him that what I wanted was a shave and a haircut, first and foremost. I had promised myself this comfort and I meant to have it. He compromised with a shave. I went to the Dimapur hospital next day with my matted hair. No clothes, but a pair of broken Army boots lay in the stretcher beside me.

## POSTSCRIPT

So my story ends, but the story of the 23rd Infantry Brigade does not. However, I am unable to give the details of their exploits in the two months that followed—languishing in a hospital bed for nine weeks brings no material to the pen of a reporter—and I must humbly offer this book as it is, unfinished, in the hope that it will sufficiently open the reader's mind to the campaign of the Chindits beyond Kohima.

I lay in a comfortable bed—first in Dimapur, then in Shillong—and as I watched the raging monsoon beat upon the earth with angry fists, my thoughts followed the men I knew down through the Naga Hills to Ukruhl and beyond, where

they lived and sweated and died among the storm-swept jungle peaks. Men there were who died in the rains of wounds, and some of tick-fever and malaria. Others fell by bullet, grenade, mortar and bayonet. Two, I know, committed suicide, unable to endure the hell any longer. The sister-columns, 76 and 33, dwindled to half their original strength and joined forces to form a single column. I talked to many who saw them come out into Imphal, weak, tired, but victorious. They spoke of seeing skeletons.

With the defeat of the Japanese at Kohima, evacuation of sick and wounded was simplified whilst the Chindit columns were still within reach of that town. The long trail to Mokokchung in the north, which must have been a nightmare journey for wounded men, was unnecessary.

The Padre, Captain the Reverend Lawrence Woods, followed me out to the Dimapur hospital within a week. His weak leg had finally given up under the gruelling pace. Next came Captain Alan Page, wasted and trembling with acute jaundice.

Others I saw in Bangalore when the campaign was over. I found the Colonel in bed, forbidden to get up, querulous with his nurse, denying his ill-health. Major Firth, suffering dysentery, also chafed at the inactivity enforced by the hospital staff. He wanted to go on leave. Donald Gunn went to hospital with jaundice.

Jaundice, fever, malaria, dysentery—all took their toll. Probably the one man unclaimed by the hospitals was Lieutenant Donald Britton, whose constitution—though he was certainly thinner—seemed absolutely unaffected by his experience of jungle warfare. When I came across him at the Rehabilitation Centre, he was eating and enjoying a plate of soya sausages—of all things.

Was the expedition a success? It may be argued that the venture was hardly worth while because of the hardships involved. Let us face the facts, and ask: What was the prize at stake? The answer is India. India was at stake; the door was half-open and the Japanese could plainly see their goal. Burma, too, was at stake, since an invasion of India would, if nothing worse, considerably diminish the prospect of an early liberation of her eastern neighbour.

It was the task of the British Fourteenth Army to terminate the enemy advance as expeditiously as possible. The special

mission of going in among the Japanese to carry out guerrilla warfare was entrusted to the 23rd Brigade, of which the men of Column 76 were a part. The Brigade was instrumental in cutting down the enemy's food supply, without which no army can operate. Smashing air attacks were dealt the Japanese, the result of intelligence sent out by the columns in the enemy's midst. Most certainly a viper in the Japanese bosom. The hardships involved were a small price to pay for the victories we enjoy in the East today. The expedition was, without question, a success.

The Chindit columns played an important role in the smashing of the invaders. They fooled the Japanese completely by their exploits. After attacking the enemy in one village, they would march at an almost unbelievable pace over country which the Japanese deemed impossible to penetrate in the monsoon, and attack again in another village. Time and again they did this until the startled Nipponese were led to believe there was an entire army operating behind them instead of considerably less than three thousand men.

The world now knows how the broken Japanese divisions turned their backs on the advancing British and Indian troops of the Fourteenth Army and retreated to the Chindwin, from where, after months of desperate fighting, they were forced further and further back until the Japanese Invasion of India became the Fourteenth Army Invasion of Burma.

An unknown brigade of Chindits helped to make this possible . . . . .

I apologize to the reader for the monotonous repetition of rain, pain and discomfort. In self-defence I can only assert that it was really so, and leave it at that.

I make no apologies for "bad" language, since I have tried to paint a true picture. Should I offend, then let me remind you that the soldier who lives like the animals and fights Nature as well as an inhuman enemy has no place in his vocabulary for fine phrases. The Chindit is a jungle-fighter, not a lounge-lizard.

*Ceylon,  
February, 1945.*





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